

Fushi no Kami

REBUILDING CIVILIZATION

STARTS WITH A VILLAGE



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Mizuumi Amakawa

Illustrator:

Mai Okuma

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Fushi no Kami 1

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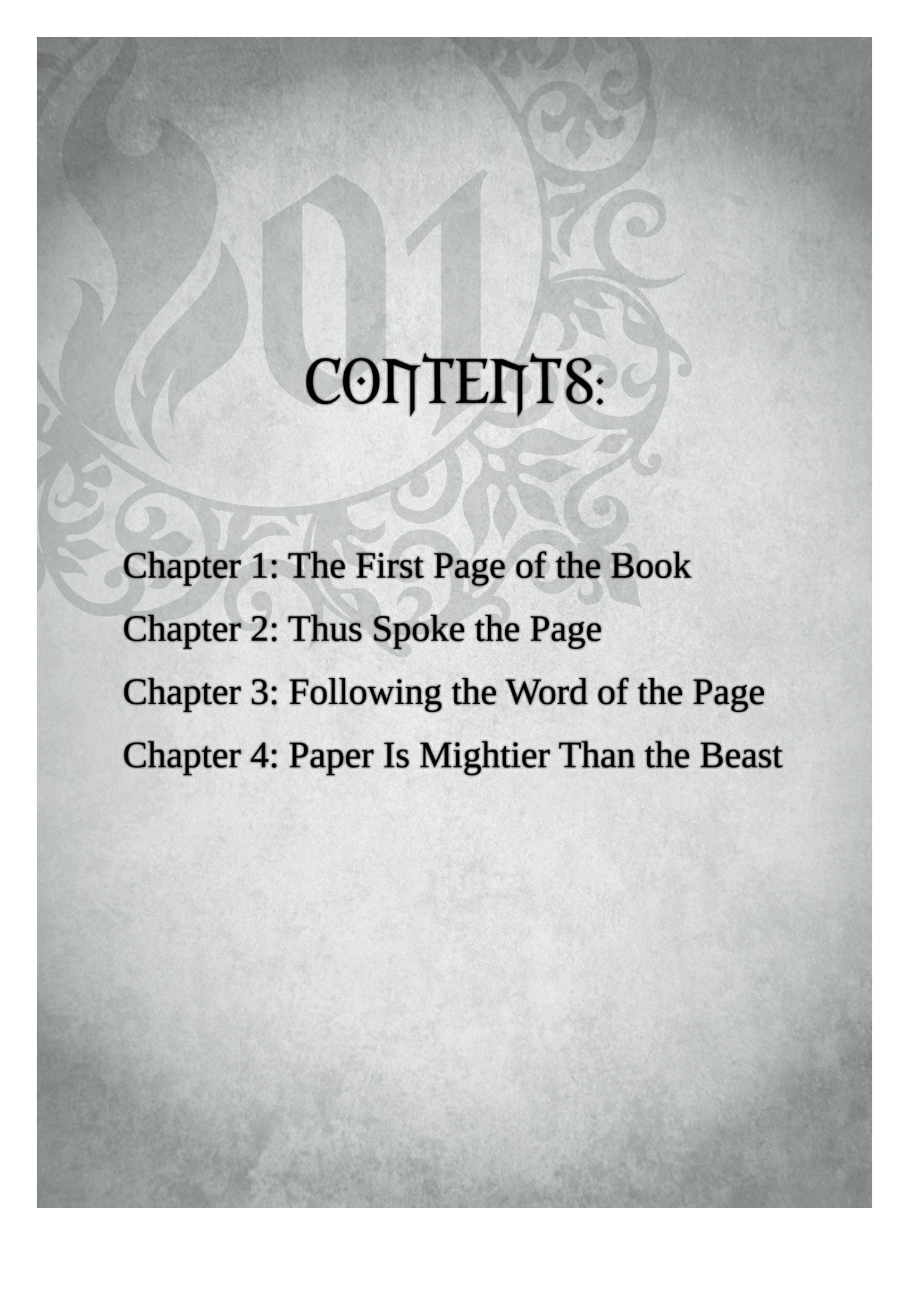
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Chapter 1: The First Page of the Book

Books. Past and present. The answer to what connected our wills had always been books. Throughout history, many tyrants tried to wipe out books. There are even terms referring solely to the act of book burning, such as *bibliocaust*. However, so far no one had succeeded in getting rid of them. Books had been burned, turned to ashes, and scattered to the winds, but they had never completely disappeared. There had always been someone who stealthily saved them from the flames. Someone who buried them in their garden to escape the tyrant's eye. Someone who dug into their unreliable memories and recreated them after the flames had ceased.

Books had always been fighting against tyrants alongside brave and passionate rebels. Even at present, the fight continued. They were engaged in a battle which had been going on since the birth of history, or rather the birth of books, against perhaps the greatest tyrant of them all. A merciless and diligent enemy who was constantly watching and incessantly trying to wipe them out. It was the tyrant called time.

Indeed, even now, books were fighting against their erasure by the tyranny of time. It was yesterday when I decided to volunteer for this grand and sublime, noble and gorgeous, loud yet quiet, and—more than anything—exciting battle. *My name is Ash. I'm an eight-year-old boy with something like past-life memories.*

"I want to read books!" I passionately confessed while opening the church door with a loud bang. No answer. The church was empty but for some rows of shabby chairs and piles of dust greeting me upon entering. As expected, it looked like Father Folke had retreated to his study at the back of the church. Completely understandable. The church was not only supposed to be a religious institution performing the rituals of the village, but also an educational institution providing a certain degree of knowledge to the community. It's like those learning seminars at the shrine. There was even supposed to be a learning seminar at our shrine.

The shabby chairs were for the attendees of religious service, as well as any villager who wanted to come and study during their free time. However, this village where I was born was without question a hick town in the middle of nowhere. There was no such thing as a family register, but since there were only about 100 people living here, everyone knew each other anyway. Now the question was, in such a marginal village, was there any person who had the time to come here and study?

In terms of civilizational development, this village was still stuck in the Dark Ages. There was no such thing as the internal combustion engine; everything relied on human power. There used to be one workhorse, but it died two years ago. We held a funeral at this church and ate the same horse afterwards. It felt more like a BBQ party than a funeral. *I'm getting hungry. I wish I could eat it again...*

But let's get back to the question. In a village without tractors, horses, or cows, and with a community who would be hopelessly lost at the mere mention of chemical fertilizer, was there anyone who had the free time on their hands? As you might have expected, the answer was no. Everyone was working day in, day out until they were dizzy. Given my age, I was actually already an excellent worker myself. While I was exempt from most hard manual labor, I was great at pulling weeds and getting rid of stones in the fields, as well as collecting edible wild plants in the outskirts of the woods and catching fish at the river.

At the village chief's house, they were exceptionally making time for their children to study. However, even then it seemed like they were not making use of the church at all. As a result, the number of people that Father Folke had educated since his arrival one year ago was zero. Or rather, it had been zero until now. I wanted to become his first pupil.

"Father Folke, Father Folke! It's Ash, from the house of David! Since you are not answering, I'm just going to let myself in!"

Standing in front of the priest's study at the back of the church, filled with idols and chairs, I knocked on the door—according to proper etiquette—before barging in with brazen rudeness. I found myself in a cozy little room which felt a little too small for its purpose. Inside the room, a man—who had been sleeping with his head on the cleared-out desk—brushed back his long hair and looked

towards me.

“Oh, it’s the bra—it’s the son of the house of David.”

“Yes, it’s the brat of the house of David, Ash! Father Folke, your face looks horrible!”

The man had rings under his eyes as if he had stayed up all night. He was very thin and not well-groomed, to a point where he did not resemble a clergyman at all. So much so that the villagers were secretly calling him ‘zombie priest.’ You know, the type that normal children would see in their nightmares. It looked like the zombie priest was trying to shrug off the damage he had taken from my energy-filled voice.

“What do you want? Would you mind lowering your voice a bit? It hurts my head.”

“Please forgive me, I was just a bit excited. I have come to ask you to let me read some of your books!”

“My books?” Folke looked at the bookshelf behind him and snorted. His motions propelled some of the dust on the books into the air. “What do you plan on achieving by reading books in a forsaken village like this?”

It seemed like he was trying to imply that books were useless in a poor village. The masochistic smile on his face made the priest indeed look like a zombie. If I wanted to get my hands on a book, I had to get past this aloof zombie guarding his graveyard of books.

“I guess I just want to have some fun reading.”

The zombie priest tilted his head. “What did you say, you brat?”

“I don’t know what you are trying to say, but we are talking about books! Isn’t the purpose of reading books to enjoy yourself? If you can’t have some time where you are just enjoying yourself to your heart’s content in this oh-so-cruel world, then what is the point of it all?”

For someone like myself, who knew an affluent life from my apparent past-life memories, the poor standards of this world were unbearable. It was at least ten times as painful for me than for anyone else. How often had I thought about

ending it all? I was not even sure of my own sanity at this point; that's how bad it was. However, the day before, I realized something. When the village chief's wife was reading me a story, I realized that I could travel to some other place by delving into the world of books! It seemed so obvious now! If reality was too painful, you could always just find pleasure somewhere else, and that somewhere was the world of fantasy!

"And this is not just a mere baseless assertion," I argued. "When you are hungry, do you need a purpose to eat? When you are drowning in the water and suffocating, do you need a purpose to get back to the surface and take a big breath?"

Compelled by the questioning of an eight-year-old, the zombie priest nodded hastily. "Of course, you would eat and breathe without thinking about it."

"Exactly! In the same way, books are something you just read and enjoy!"

"I see." Folke nodded in agreement and reluctantly reached for the bookshelf. "Wait a minute, that reasoning doesn't sound right."

"No, it's perfectly logical! What is wrong about my reasoning? Those are my pure and sincere feelings toward books!" I gathered all my passion and gave Folke a fierce look. If looks could kill, he would have died a hundred times over.

I don't know if it was due to my stare, but the priest's face turned even paler than usual and he cautiously nodded. "Alright, you can have a book. But can you even read?"

"Father Folke, do you know how many people in this village can read?"

"Two. Three including myself."

"Precisely. I see you already know the answer to your question!"

"Of course, you can't read."

It had already been eight years since I was born into this world, but I could count on my fingers how many letters I had seen in that time, so it couldn't really be helped. If we were talking about letters from the civilization of my past life on the other hand, I could read and write them fluently.

"I don't know where you learned to talk the way you do, but I have no

interest in teaching a little brat like you how to read.”

“Oh, you are not being very helpful,” I said, even though I had anticipated this outcome.

Listening to rumors and judging from my own experience, Father Folke appeared to have a rotten personality. Not in the sense that he was evil; this man in his early thirties had just lost all motivation and sense of purpose after being relegated from the city life in the capital to this remote, impoverished village—the end of the line for a demoted elite. It was to be expected that asking someone like him for a favor would not go over well.

“In that case, could you please lend me an easy-to-read book? That’s all I will ask of you in your capacity as the educator of this village,” I requested.

“Don’t be ridiculous! Do you have any idea how valuable books are? What am I going to do if you ruin or sell them?”

“Come on, no one will notice if one book is missing.”

Hearing my words, Father Folke turned around to look at the bookshelf, where the dust was shamelessly piling up. Seeing how poorly it was maintained, even he couldn’t oppose my statement. “Tsk. You have a lot of nerve saying that to a priest, you stupid brat.”

“There’s nothing to fear; no matter how angry you get, I’m sure none of the other villagers will mind. Especially if I managed to get some money for those books.”

In this village, books weren’t worth anything. Even if I stole a book, people might judge me for the act of stealing itself, but no one would bat an eye for the book. And if I bribed them, I was certain that the act of stealing would be forgiven too. If the books weren’t worth anything, stealing them would have been akin to taking a stone from the roadside and putting it in your pocket; no one would consider it theft.

Wouldn’t you agree, Father? I’m sure you would. I looked up at the priest while smiling.

“You stupid brat, are you threatening me?”

Come on, you don't have to look so scary. It's not like I am talking in a way that might sound threatening because I want to be threatening. I just want our church's priest to faithfully fulfill his role as an educator. The only one trying to sabotage you is yourself. I'm only demanding my right to education by speaking in a way that maybe could be interpreted as threatening. Even a child would know who the bad guy is here.



“Well, I hope you will believe me that I won’t do any such thing as selling your books.” If that were the case, I would have stolen, not borrowed them. I tried my best to convey this message with my mischievous smile. “However, I can’t guarantee that I won’t get your books dirty. I will try my best, but accidents will happen.” Before the priest could get an objection out of his mouth, I added the following words, which were hard to deny, “Aren’t books getting naturally worn down over time too?”

“Well yes, eventually they will get damaged,” he admitted.

As expected, he agreed with me. If I were talking to someone who had left all their reason in another realm, this wouldn’t have worked. Luckily, Father Folke was a logical person, so with a feeling of gratitude, I expanded upon his words. “Exactly. Books will deteriorate and eventually perish. I wonder how often those books have been read so far? And how often will they be read until then?”

Obviously, there was no way of knowing, but I was certain that the answer was not very often. At the very least, it looked like they would naturally lose their form before being worn out from reading.

“Wouldn’t those books also prefer to maybe receive some damage being read by me, rather than decaying while simply collecting dust?” I continued. “Besides, if I read them, there is a chance that they will be resurrected in the future through my memories.”

“I see.” The priest looked impressed as he crossed his arms and nodded several times. “I have to admit that you are a glib-tongued brat. Are you sure you are the child of a farmer? You sound more like a merchant to me.”

“I think you already know the answer to that question.”

“Right... Well, out of consideration for your eloquent speech, I’ll let you borrow a book. Make sure you read it thoroughly so it can be passed down to future gen—” And just as it looked like I had gotten my way, it seemed that Folke had come back to his senses. “Wait a minute! You can’t even read!”

“Damn, you noticed.”

“Damn you, you dangerous little brat!”

“Me? Dangerous? I wouldn’t even harm a fly! I’m only a helpless, innocent eight-year-old!”

What an outrageous attempt to damage my reputation! I wasn’t trying to trick him. Maybe I worded it in a way that could be interpreted like I was, but I was merely trying to convince him.

“Yes, it is true that I can’t read right now. That is why I want you to lend me an easy book, so I can teach myself.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! If it was that easy to learn how to read, they wouldn’t have to send priests like me to remote villages.”

“I didn’t say it was easy. Please let me borrow a book with scripture passages that you often recite during service, like a textbook compiled of them. A collection of prayers? That would be good.”

Father Folke was thinking to himself while looking like he had just been proposed a get-rich-quick scheme by a swindler. He must have been suspecting that I had laid out another trap.

Once again, I might have been talking in a way that could be interpreted as a threat or a swindle, but I was only trying to convince him; nothing I said warranted this much suspicion towards me. *Please just look at my puppy-dog eyes and believe me.*

“There! You got that suspicious look on you again!”

Folke must not be seeing right. Maybe due to his insomnia.

“Whatever,” he finally said, “if that’s what you want, I have a manuscript that I wrote myself. Even if you tried selling it, you wouldn’t be able to make much money out of it, and even if it gets damaged, it wouldn’t be a problem.”

“Thank you so much, Father Folke! May God bless you!”

In the end, all my convincing had worked. After all, taking your time and being polite in conversation was the best approach! Violence, as well as swindling and threats, were the tools of barbarians who didn’t know how to reason. People could understand each other if they talked rationally to each other.

With a great sense of achievement, I reached out for the manuscript. But

Folke held on to it with a tight grip, not wanting to let it go.

“Once again, thank you so much. Please rest assured that I will take good care of the manuscript.” *Let go of it, you bastard.*

“Listen, don’t even think about doing anything strange.”

“Even if you don’t intimidate me; I am not planning to do anything strange.” *Hurry up and hand it over. Just let go. This is mine now.*

At last, Folke reluctantly let go of the manuscript, as he should have done from the start. I refrained from saying anything regarding his generosity, his slowness, or his stinginess, flipped through the book—or rather, the stack of papers—and with my eyes traced the letters whose meaning eluded me.

Among them, I discovered a few letters which seemed familiar, so I asked Folke, “Could you please tell me how to read this sentence?”

“Hey, didn’t you say you wouldn’t ask anything else?”

“I did say that this was all I would ask of you in your capacity as the educator of this village. So, this time, I am asking you in your capacity as the priest.” *Come on, don’t just stand there with that stupid look on your face; hurry up and tell me. I swear I won’t ask you for anything else... At least not today.*

According to Folke, it was a prayer that was widely used. Not just by priests, but also among the peasants. It read, ‘Strong wolf god, wise monkey god, and fierce dragon god. Bless us with your great powers today.’

As I had expected. I had already guessed it when I saw the punctuation and the letters for ‘wolf god,’ ‘monkey god,’ and ‘dragon god,’ which were the same as those of the engravings on the idols worshiped at the church. These letters were phonograms and not ideograms. Lucky me!

It took me one month to finally finish reading the thin manuscript. Reading unknown letters was already a difficult feat, only made harder by the fact that it was a handwritten manuscript. Regardless, the main reason why it took me so long was the lack of free time.

The fall harvest had ended a month ago, so farm work had calmed down a bit,

but that didn't mean that farmers had free time at their hands. If we didn't plant winter wheat in anticipation of spring harvest, we would face starvation, and if we didn't make preparations for passing winter, we would freeze to death. It felt like playing the game of life on nightmare mode, where even the slightest bit of negligence led to immediate death. The only consolation was that we had a lower death rate than other colder regions during winter because we didn't get much snow. What an abysmal standard for consolation.

"So, can I borrow the next book, please?"

"What, are you already bored of this one?"

As usual, the sleep-deprived Folke rolled his eyes. I had no idea what annoyed him so much.

"Wouldn't you say one month is quite long for this manuscript?" I countered.

"It's *only* one month. There is no way your reading ability has progressed much at all in one month. Especially teaching yourself."

"Huh?" It seemed like we were talking past each other. He thought I had given up teaching myself how to read with this book. I was a little offended, but that would have been a correct assumption if I didn't have my apparent past-life memories. As I strived to be an honorable person, I remembered my debt of gratitude towards the priest for letting me borrow the book and politely rephrased, "Oh no, I already remembered all the letters in this book, so could you please let me borrow another one?"

"Don't think I'm stupid. If you're going to lie, make it a bit more believable."

As he laughed, making fun of me, all my remaining feelings of gratitude disappeared in an instant. "I see, you are calling me, an innocent eight-year-old, a liar without any proof?"

"I don't need any proof. Learning how to read in a month is just impossible; out of question! I mean, you were only able to read the first sentence, and even then, only because I taught you!"

It looked like he wasn't going to listen to me. In that case, I had no other option. If I was not able to talk to him like a civilized person, there was only one way left: I had to go to war. And not just any war—a holy war, unquestionably

justified in the face of a clergyperson who was inclined to doubt someone's intentions before believing them. I was going to pull the carpet from under the feet of this sad priest who didn't believe people and make him trip over.

"What would you be willing to do if I can prove you wrong?" I challenged him.

"There is no way!"

"Well, then I will ask you for the right to borrow any book under your supervision if I can prove to you that I can read."

"You're on. If you can prove me wrong, I will let you borrow as many books as you want." Folke was challenging me with a condescending sneer.

"Let's see..." The quickest method would have been to just read another book from his collection, but they were all handwritten. If I happened to choose a book with peculiar handwriting, I could run into a problem. Of course the opposite—Folke's handwriting being the peculiar one—was also a possibility. "I thought of a good way to prove it! Could you please lend me a pen and paper?"

"What are you trying to do?"

"I will write up a contract, stating that you are going to let me borrow your books as a punishment for calling me a liar, killing two birds with one stone."

Since I used Folke's letters as an example in my studies, it was unlikely that he wouldn't be able to read my writing. If by any chance I made a mistake, the contract would be void, but if I managed to write everything down correctly, I could get him to sign it.

As expected, Folke was getting nervous after hearing my plan. Although he thought it was impossible, it looked like he started having doubts at the mention of a binding force such as a contract.

"How are we going to proceed? We don't have to do any of this, but in that case, I would like you to apologize. I was deeply hurt when you called me, a pure child, a liar. I am so sad I cannot stop crying."

I tried to look as sad and pretended to cry as unnaturally as possible. I wanted to provoke him. It would be much more fun to get him to a point where he absolutely refused to apologize to a feisty brat like me. And it looked like it

worked.

“What are you saying, you stupid brat, you’re not even hurt in the slightest. I’ll tear through that demon-like, thick skin and show you who’s right.” Father Folke squared his shoulders before going to look for pen and paper. I won.

By the way, those demons that adults always mention... Do they really exist in this world? I always thought they were just a bogeyman to scare children into staying away from danger. However, having gone through the spiritual experience of having apparent past-life memories, I can no longer easily laugh off other mysterious phenomena.

“There you go. Show me what you got, stupid brat.”

“Yes, sir.” *You are crossing your arms and looking tough, but I can see the wavering in your eyes.*

I dipped the quill pen into the ink and slowly started writing. It didn’t go very smoothly, since I wasn’t used to writing or using a quill pen.

“I’m sorry for my bad writing, but can you read it?” After finishing, I wiped my forehead, even though I hadn’t sweat at all. When I saw Father Folke’s face turn pale, I knew he could read it. “Would you be so kind as to read it out loud?”

“I can’t believe it. You really went and learned how to read and write in one month.”

He was too surprised to read out my sentence, but this was what I had written:

‘As punishment for baselessly calling him a liar, the priest Folke will grant Ash permission to borrow without restriction any book under his supervision.’

Luckily, I was dealing with phonograms. If those were ideograms, there was no way I could have learned them within a month. Ideograms were usually more complex and numerous than phonograms, which were easy to write in their colloquial forms once you remembered their pronunciation and the corresponding letters. In that regard, the latter were much more convenient.

“You little... I mean, Ash! How did you remember the letters? You weren’t even able to read at all!”

He cross-examined me while firmly grabbing my shoulder. I was scared. Having the so-called zombie priest draw closer to my face felt like I was about to be bitten.

“Well, all I really did was remember the letters from the first sentence that you taught me, apply them to the other sentences, and then guess from context the letters that I didn’t know.”

It was like cracking a code. Using the many sentences that I had heard over the past eight years as a starting point for my decipherment, I was able to fill in a lot of gaps. However, there were probably still some letters that I didn’t know, as well as words that I could read but whose meaning eluded me. It felt more like I was still studying rather than reading the book.

Father Folke let himself fall into his chair. There was no need to be overly dramatic. Although considering that I was an eight-year-old in a village with a literacy rate close to zero, maybe he wasn’t exaggerating.

Anyways, with this, the contract was set up. I had him sign it and thus was ready to borrow the next book.

“If possible, I would like to read another religious book, or an easy story with similar vocabulary.”

I was thinking about something along the lines of a story about a saint, or maybe a textbook. Those usually didn’t have many difficult words and were fun to read. As I watched Father Folke choose a book, a bright smile came over my face.

I left the church with a spring in my step, cherishing a new hope called books. All that was on my mind was books. In my hand, I was unmistakably holding a book with a story inside. This human work of art, filled to the brim with hope which was igniting my will to live, raised my mood through the roof. I was riding on such a high that I felt I might get blasted up in the sky to join a star constellation.

I thought I was flying in the air with no ground underneath my feet when I heard someone call out to me. “Hey, Ash! Can you come over here for a moment?”

Certainly, I could. In high spirits, I returned to the ground with a broad grin and greeted the girl who had called me. “Hello, Maika. Today the weather is the best that it has ever been in my entire life!”

It was Lady Maika, who was the same age as me. She was the most popular girl among all the boys our age, since she always had a bright smile on her face and was very sociable. As usual, her ponytail was flying in the wind and her smile felt like a ray of sunshine in this gloomy village.

“Yeah, today the weather is... not that great? Did you not see all the clouds?” Her face suddenly clouded, just like the sky above us. That was a rare sight.

While thinking about the possibility that the weather was actually linked to her mood, I nodded. “Yeah, both the clouds and the temperatures are low. It looks like winter has finally arrived.” I smilingly added that she should take care not to catch a cold in this weather.

More and more clouds of doubt passed across her face. They looked like they were about to burst into hail. “I feel like you aren’t making much sense... Could it be that you are in a good mood?”

“Yes, a very good mood indeed.”

I answered with a sunlike smile, trying to counter Lady Maika, who looked like she was brewing up a winter storm. In winter, the sun was usually weak, but due to my atmosphere-breaking, high-energy mood, my smile was shining brighter than any ozone-layer-filtered summer sun.



“I didn’t think you could smile like this,” she said.

Hearing her murmur those words, I tilted my head. Wasn’t I always smiling? Well, at least my face muscles were. On the inside, I was constantly in despair, so if anything, it was mostly an expression of my resignation. It was only recently that I had been able to smile from the heart. I thought my smile still looked the same, but maybe Lady Maika was able to tell the difference. That was amazing. However, right now she was frozen.

“Maika? Are you alright?”

Was there something wrong with her? I got a little bit closer to look at her beautiful face and noticed that it had been flooded with an unhealthy-looking deep red. Was it this red earlier? She was also pressing her hands against her chest and looked like she was in pain.

“Have you caught a cold?” I asked.

That would have been bad. In this world—and in this village—the common cold was still a fatal illness. On top of their diets lacking in nutrients, medicine—which was a common commodity in the world from my apparent past-life memories—was virtually non-existent around here. As a result, catching a cold was akin to a death sentence.

“If you are not feeling well, you should not be outside. Let me take you home,” I proposed.

Upon touching Lady Maika’s shoulder, her small body (I say small, but she was taller than me) started shaking as if she had been shocked. Was there some static electricity? I didn’t feel anything myself, but given the dry air, it was possible.

“No, I’m fine!” Lady Maika was vigorously waving her hands in denial and took a step backwards. She looked at me and started playing with her hair. “You really don’t have to worry about me; I don’t have a cold.”

“Are you sure?”

Her face was still red, but maybe she was just flustered because I got too close. I figured she had no problem being around boys, as I had seen her play

with some only the day before, but I guess I was wrong. Girls tended to mature much faster than boys.

“Well, I am relieved you are fine, but take good care. You are an important person, after all.”

Lady Maika was a very friendly and active young girl, but she was also the daughter of the village chief. As such, she was of great importance around here, and if all went well, she would become the next village chief. Given how cute and tall she was, it was no surprise that she was popular among the boys our age.

“I am important?” Lady Maika reiterated with a red face.

“Yes, very much,” I nodded in agreement.

Please be more aware of your own importance. I sometimes worry that you will hurt yourself when I see how rough you play.

“Uh... yeah... I guess...” Lady Maika mumbled and looked down.

She seemed to have some self-awareness, but after all, she was still a child, so it was natural that she wanted to play. She also seemed to like moving around more than the boys her age, so even if you told her to calm down, she probably wouldn't listen.

I should probably take this book back home soon. While Lady Maika's clouded face was slowly clearing up again, the same could not be said for the sky above. I wanted to avoid getting caught in a cold rain shower. “Was there anything else you wanted to talk about?”

“Uh... uhm... No, I just wanted to say hi.”

“I guess I better get going then!”

I bowed my head and tightened my grip on the book before heading back home.

I wonder how much I can read until the sun goes down. I say reading, but I'll probably end up having to decipher half of the letters. I can't wait to be able to just purely read.

Maika's Perspective

I used to not like Ash.

At that time, I just wanted to fall into my comfy bed. When I came back home from playing with my friends, my mom told me to take care of some work at the warehouse. She said it was an important job, but working after playing and running around all day was tough; I didn't wanna do it. However, I knew that no matter how much I complained, the work wouldn't just disappear, so I reluctantly walked towards the warehouse. That's how I was feeling, so when I ran into Ash, I thought it must have been a sign from God. Since Ash was very smart, getting him to help usually made work a lot easier.

"Hey, Ash! Can you come over here for a moment?" As I called out to him, Ash immediately noticed me and stopped walking.

"Hello, Maika. Today the weather is the best that it has ever been in my entire life!"

As always, Ash was greeting me in a very mature way. He sounded like the people from the city who came to visit my mom and dad.

"Yeah, today the weather is... not that great? Did you not see all the clouds?"

There was barely any sunlight and it looked like rain was going to fall out of the sky any minute. I had never heard anyone call this good weather. Who would consider this to be the best weather of their entire life?

"Yeah, both the clouds and the temperatures are low. It looks like winter has finally arrived."

So, it seemed that Ash was also aware of the dark clouds above our heads. He even worried about me catching a cold. Yet at the same time, he was comfortable saying with a smile on his face that this was the best weather of his entire life. Something seemed off. Ash had some... or rather, a lot of strange habits, but even considering his usual self, something seemed off.

"I feel like you aren't making much sense..." But somehow, looking at Ash today made me feel happy. "Could it be that you are in a good mood?"

"Yes, a very good mood indeed."

Ash quickly replied with a smile to my question. It was the first time I'd ever seen such a genuinely happy smile on his face. Usually, he had a more reserved smile, which was popular among girls our age and often described as gentle. I couldn't say I blamed them; he was handsome. However, I didn't like that smile; it looked fake. It made my chest hurt to think that he was only pretending.

When I talked to my mom about this, she frowned at me with a sad look in her eyes and patted my head. "You are just like your mom and your dad; you can tell what someone is truly feeling just by looking at them."

She said that, while Ash was nice to me, he was probably suffering and going through a lot of pain when he was on his own. She said that he was too smart for his own good.

If that was the case, then why didn't he just say so? He didn't have to pretend to be a grown-up, and there was no shame in crying. At the same time, I knew that wouldn't make his suffering magically disappear; just like the work at the warehouse didn't magically disappear. I realized that was the reason why he was always putting on a smile. He had to convince himself to keep going on, no matter how painful and miserable life was. I became sad and I felt a strong, throbbing pain in my chest when I thought about Ash.

I was bad at dealing with negative thoughts. I preferred to always be as bright and happy as possible. If I were to fall in love with someone, they would have to make me feel that way. They would have to be like a fire in the hearth that softens a cold winter night. Like a light that guides me to the safety of my home on a scary night. Ash's smile didn't make me feel any of these things. Well, I thought it didn't.

"I didn't think you could smile like this."

I couldn't take my eyes off his smile—the same one that I used to dislike. I had never witnessed anything shine so bright; even the summer sun burning over the fields looked pale in comparison. What a beautiful smile. I wondered what made him so happy. How was it possible that someone who was in so much pain could suddenly produce such a grin? I wished I could smile like that. I felt my chest tighten. ...But it didn't feel uncomfortable. It didn't feel uncomfortable at all.

I used to not like Ash. Now, I did not dislike him either.



Winter was in full swing and even though dates were a bit vague, I was now able to call myself a nine-year-old.

My studies went smoother than expected. There were still a lot of technical terms that I did not know, but I was no longer tripping up over more common vocabulary. You could say that I was no longer just studying words and letters, but that I could properly read.

However, not everything went so smoothly. Since spring was drawing near, I would soon no longer have as much time to spare for reading. Work in the fields was going to be busy again and my father was ostentatiously clicking his tongue regarding his son going to borrow new books.

“I don’t get whatcha tryin’ to achieve by readin’ those books—you won’t get any more grains of wheat from reading. Once it’s spring, I will teach you how little those books are worth.”

My father did not have any love or understanding for academics. Considering the low literacy rate of the village, being able to read and write was already considered great scholarship.

How deplorable! How could you not understand that someone studying, trying, thinking, and creating would eventually lead to a more affluent life! Even though that was what I was thinking, I could only shrug off with a polite smile the ridicule from the whole village, who had the same philosophy as my father. There was no point in getting worked up and trying to argue my point of view, as that would only scare them away. I was trying to keep my seat at the negotiation table until the right time came. So, for the time being, I just had to be patient. Eventually, I would make sure they understood, even if it meant punching them in the nose.

Having renewed my determination, I headed to the church, where Father Folke was already waiting for me.

“Did something happen, Father Folke?”

“I need to talk to you.”

Lately, his complexion seemed healthier. The black rings under his eyes had disappeared and his previously sunken cheeks looked much fuller. He was surprisingly good-looking, and there had been whispers going around of the zombie priest coming back to life.

“You need to talk to me? I feel like this is the first time you have come to me to talk about something.”

“It is indeed. Up until now, you’ve only come here to get your books...” He led me to his study, where he offered me a seat. This also felt like it was a first. I sat down in the chair while I tilted my head in confusion. I felt a bit sad when I realized that I was not yet tall enough for my feet to touch the ground sitting down. “So Ash, it looks like you have become able to read quite well.”

“And all thanks to your kindness. I cannot thank you enough.”

As I bowed my head in gratitude, I saw a wry smile come over Father Folke’s healthy-looking face. “My kindness, right...”

“Yes, you have been very kind!”

After our initial disagreement, I never had to resort to invoking the contract, so it was indeed all thanks to Father Folke’s kindness.

“Well, enough about me. Now that you have learned how to read, I will force you to continue even if you don’t want to.”

“I am not intending to stop any time soon, but that does sound scary.” *I wonder what he’s up to.*

I had never seen such passion in his eyes when he finally got to the point. “Seeing how extraordinarily intelligent you are given your age, there is a book I want you to read.”

“Oh?” I did not consider myself to be particularly intelligent, but to someone who did not know about my past life, I probably looked like a child prodigy. I wondered what kind of book you would want to make someone like that read. Indeed, it was a remarkably interesting development for this village without any real entertainment. “What kind of book is it?”

“Hmm... there’s a lot... I need to do some explaining, but first, take a look at

it.”

He took out a book that had been stored away in a special case and put it on top of his desk. The binding of the book already looked different from the ones on the shelf. You could see that someone had spent a lot of money to carefully craft it in a way that it would survive for a long time.

“This does not look like an ordinary book,” I remarked.

“Yeah, it is custom made. Go ahead, take a look inside.”

“As you wish.”

When I turned the blank, leather cover, I saw some letters inside that looked like a title. They looked different from all the letters that I had seen these past three months. I had never seen handwritten letters quite like these. And it was not just any handwriting—it looked like it took a lot of time and great care to produce such neat writing. The shapes of the letters and the spaces in between them were extremely consistent, almost as if they had been printed, but still, I could not read them. The methodical letters continued to the next page and only the occasional irregular ones reminded me that this wasn’t a printed book. I wondered how much time it would have taken to create a volume like this. The high-quality bookbinding only added to my awe.

However, I could not read what was inside. Even considering the fact that the letters were extremely neat compared to the ones I had seen until then, I could not find any common points. Every time I thought I had found a letter that looked similar to the ones I knew, I had no idea how to read the adjacent ones and thus could not comprehend anything.

“What do you think?” Father Folke asked me timidly.

You could tell from the cadence of his voice that he was expecting good news, but unfortunately, I had to disappoint him and shook my head. “I’m sorry, I can’t read anything...”

“I see.” He let out a deep sigh.

“There are some letters that look similar to the ones I know, but most of them I can’t read, so I have no idea what it could say. What kind of book is this anyway?”

“Oh yeah, I should probably explain that.” He looked at me with a facial expression close to that of the zombie priest once again. “This is a manuscript of a book that is believed to originate from the early period of an ancient civilization.”

“Am I hearing that right? An ancient civilization?” *The mere mention of these words fills me with excitement and nostalgia!*

“What a strange reaction... Weren’t there also stories about ancient civilizations in the books you read?”

“Um... yeah, there were, but...” There were indeed stories about beggars finding happiness after discovering treasure in the ruins of ancient civilizations. Similarly, there were also ones about tyrants falling to their own doom. However... this was different. “A manuscript from an ancient civilization?”

This was a real manuscript from an ancient civilization. With a cluster of orderly letters that looked as if they were printed. In that case, had printing technology been widely available in their culture? Not necessarily. The mechanism of printing itself was fairly easy, but its dissemination was a whole other story. *I shouldn’t dream too big; I’ll only end up being severely disappointed later. Okay, I have calmed down. Looks like the lack of excitement in my everyday life has left fertile ground for my imagination to spiral out of control.*

“Please excuse my strange behavior,” I apologized, carrying on the conversation. “So, you were saying that this is a handwritten copy of a book from an ancient civilization?”

“Yes. The early-period ancient civilization dates back to approximately 2000 years ago.”

Thinking about the history of my apparent past life—repeating ‘apparent’ is kind of annoying, so from here on out I will just drop it and say ‘my past life’—2000 years doesn’t seem very long ago.

“The early period was then followed by a late period which took place about 1000 years ago.” In other words, there were two periods of ancient civilization. It might have seemed like a lot, but it wouldn’t have been surprising even if there had been more. “The letters that we are using now originate from that

late-period ancient civilization. Although that was also a long time ago, it is commonly understood that the letters haven't really changed since then, since it isn't impossible to read texts from that period."

"Wow, that's quite impressive. I would love to read those sometime."

"If you go to a temple in the city, you can read manuscripts of late-period books. Unfortunately, the originals are kept from the public, as they haven't been preserved very well."

"I would actually be scared to touch an original. As long as I can read it, I don't mind manuscripts."

Either way, I was astonished by the fact that it was possible to easily read 1000-year-old books. In my past life, there were also copies of literary works dating back 1000 years, but the letters were so different that it was exceedingly difficult to read them.

"And it is said that the letters from the late period developed from the ones in the early period."

"I see. So it is not impossible to read books from 1000 years ago, but it is impossible to read those from 2000 years ago."

"Exactly." Well, that was not surprising. Reading a text from 2000 years ago was a Herculean task, even with a cushion of 1000 years in between. Or maybe the cushion was making it even more confusing? I was satisfied with that conclusion. "Back in the capital I was studying to decipher this book, but..." Father Folke expressed his dissatisfaction in a trembling voice. "I talked to my fellow researchers over and over again, I went through all the past research papers, but... I still couldn't read it. I couldn't even read a single bit!"

He did not raise his voice or clench his fist that was laying on top of the book, but even so, I could still feel a burning passion emanating from his body. He was not satisfied. Or rather, he did not want to give up yet.

"In the capital, I was working as a professional researcher at the temple. However, since I didn't produce any results, I was sent here to this remote village." Even then he did not want to give up the deciphering of the ancient language, so he paid a fortune to bring this manuscript with him. He went on to

say that he was engaging with the book night and day to a point where he got permanent rings under his eyes. I had learned the true origins of the zombie priest from his monologue.

“Why are you so fixated on a book from an ancient civilization?” I asked.

“It’s strange...” He had a soft smile on his face. “I don’t entirely know myself. Why was I so fixated, now and back then?” He broke into a big smile. “It might have been the same reason why you wanted to read books.”

“Huh?” I could not help but also smile. If it was for the same reason that I had wanted to read books, that meant that it was simply because he enjoyed it. “In that case, there’s no way around it.”

“Indeed, that’s who I am.”

“You are not going to stop.”

“I’m not going to stop at all.”

Both our shoulders shook as we let out a stifled chuckle.

“I am guessing you want me to help you decipher the book, since you showed it to me,” I said.

“Of course. I was impressed when I learned that you deciphered the first book merely by relying on a few hints. Eventually, anyone could come up with the same idea, but to actually do what you did is not as easy as it sounds.”

“I am flattered by your praise.” I was also interested in this rare book, promising a transcending experience—it was just what I wanted. “For a start, could you tell me what you have found out so far in your research?”

“Sure. You were right when you noted earlier that there are similar letters. That is also the consensus of all the researchers so far.”

It must have been extremely stressful for Father Folke to be exiled to a remote village where he couldn’t continue his work, or maybe even more importantly, where he couldn’t talk to anyone about his passion for deciphering this ancient-civilization book.

He continued talking with relish until the sundown. Listening to him made me quite exhausted, but seeing the carefree, childlike joy on his smiling face, I could

not help but feel happy for him and let him talk.

After getting through Father Folke's tumultuous research talk, I noticed that the sun was about to sink behind the forest when I stepped outside the church. By the time I got back home, it would be pitch dark already. Putting aside my dad, I had to hurry back home, or my mom would worry herself sick. However, it looked like I was going to take a little detour.

"Good evening, Maika!"

For some reason, the daughter of the village chief was walking near the church.

Maika's Perspective

I had messed up. Before I knew it, everything around me had turned completely dark. I was looking at the sun disappear behind the forest trees. How had it come to this?

I had stopped playing with my usual friends before sunset so I could head back home. Maybe I shouldn't have made a detour. Since I was going back early, I thought it was a good idea to go for a little walk, and for no special reason whatsoever, I ended up passing by near the church. It was not related at all to the recent rumors that had been going around the village of Ash regularly visiting the church. But, since I had come here, I wondered whether Ash was inside today. I wasn't fixated on him or anything; I just couldn't help but wonder... because of the rumors. What was he doing there?

Maybe I could have peeked inside. But no, it was a church, a place for studying, and I hated studying more than anything. My parents were always telling me that I had to study for my future... and they were right. It was important—I had to study. But I didn't want to; most of the time I didn't understand a thing, and it was so boring.

The church. Studying. Ash. I wanted to go take a look, but at the same time, I also didn't want to go inside.

While I was worrying about all these things, the evening sun had already

started to go down. This was bad; my mom was going to scold me. Also, it would have already been dark in the village, and I hated the dark. Not as much as studying, but I still hated it. I was anxious thinking about the dark way back home and my angry mom waiting there for me.

While I was in a fluster, the door of the church opened. I immediately thought that it must have been Ash, since Father Folke almost never went outside.

“Good evening, Maika.”

And I was right. It looked like he was a little surprised when our eyes met, but he responded with a smile. The same smile that I used to dislike until recently, now relieved me.

“Oh, he-hello, Ash!”

I felt relieved, but at the same time I was nervous, and I couldn’t find my words.

“How come a young girl like you is walking alone this late?” It seemed unusual that a shorter, young boy was worrying about me. However, he said it in a very calm way that didn’t feel weird. “I understand that playing around can be fun, but it is dangerous outside this late!”

His wry smile, that made it seem like he was talking to a younger child, made him look mature. My chest tightened again.

“Yeah... uhm... you’re right. Before I knew it, it just turned dark...”

I felt a hot flush come on my face, and I instinctively looked down. I didn’t want him to see my surely-very-red face and think of me as someone weird. While I was busy hiding my blush, Ash started to naturally walk in the direction of my house.

“Come on, let us go home. I will walk you back to your house.”

“Really?” My mom was still going to scold me, but at least the dark way back home wouldn’t be as scary if Ash came along. Still, Ash’s house was in the opposite direction of mine. “I mean, no, it’s fine. Really. It’s already this dark, so you should hurry back home too.”

“That is exactly why I cannot let you go alone!”

Considering how late it was, Ash was surely going to get scolded by Mr. David and Mrs. Sheba. Although maybe they didn't worry as much about him, since he was so reliable, unlike me. In that case, maybe it was okay to accept his offer.

"...If you insist." I was in such a flutter that I started to sound formal like Ash.

"Do not worry about me. Please make sure to watch your step."

So, I ended up walking back home together with Ash. As expected, he didn't seem to mind the darkness at all—he was so reliable... yet also strange.

We were both born in the winter of the same year. Normally, as the daughter of the village chief who was told to study, I should have been the more reliable one, but he was so far ahead of me. How had he managed to get such a head start? I knew he had recently started studying at the church, but even before that he was amazing...

Then, out of nowhere, Ash grabbed my hand.

"This way, Maika!"

"W-W-What are you doing?"

I was startled and walked in an awkward way. Not because he suddenly grabbed my hand too strongly, but because I just wasn't expecting it.

It seemed like I was the only one panicking; Ash looked completely fine. He even doubled down, saying, "This way is much darker than I expected, so let us hold hands until we get back!"

I couldn't believe how unfazed he was by holding a girl's hand. Why did he think he could so easily hold my hand just because it was dark, or the way dangerous? Of course, I didn't say anything. I hoped he wasn't going to get any wrong ideas. I only allowed it because we were on a dangerous path.

Of course, I didn't say any of this out loud, but I tried conveying it through the hand that he was holding. Unfortunately, it didn't look like it worked—how unfair. I didn't realize Ash was such a sly person. And there were still so many other things I didn't know about him. Since I thought that was unfair, I tried my best to get some answers.

"By the way..."

“Yes?”

“Lately, you have been going to the church a lot, right?”

“I have. Father Folke has been helping me out.”

I wondered with what exactly he was helping Ash, but then I remembered that the church was a place for studying, so I felt like there was no need to ask him.

After a short pause, I changed the angle of my question. “Do you have fun at the church?”

“Yes, a lot of fun.”

He replied with a happy smile I was almost envious of, like the one he showed me last time.

“...I’m glad you enjoy it, then.”

I didn’t understand why, but it seemed like Ash had fun studying. So much so that he smiled just thinking about it.

Not even once had I thought of studying as something fun. However, I thought that maybe, just maybe, it was also possible for me to enjoy studying if I could be together with Ash. I wondered if I could smile and have fun just like he did.

In front of my house, Ash and I split ways. He left rather quickly. Since he had held my hand, I had expected him to stick around for at least a little longer. I was so upset at Ash’s inconsiderate behavior that I had completely forgotten that I was about to get scolded by my mom. I only remembered it when I opened the door and saw her waiting for me.

“I-I’m back.”

It was so dark that I wouldn’t have been able to tell what her face looked like, even if I had looked directly at it. The only light in the room was a candle burning on top of the stick in my mom’s hand. The flickering light only made her seem scarier, as it reinforced the darkness covering her face.

“I’m... I’m so sorry I’m late.”

“Maika...” My mom talked in a calm voice. Most people in the village weren’t aware of this, but my mom could be really scary when she was angry. As the person who upset her the most, I was able to vouch for that. My dad was always saying with a smile on his face that she was only angry out of love. However, I always ended up crying because of that love. “Do you know what I am about to say?”

“Y-Yes, Mother.”

I straightened myself, feeling as if I had been pierced through my back by my dad’s sword. I had broken my promise to come back home before sunset, as well as my promise not to walk around after it became dark. Breaking one promise was already cause for a good scolding, but I had broken two at once. My eyes were full of remorse. *I’m so, so sorry.*

While I was shaking, my mom slowly nodded her head. “I am not angry. You already know you did something bad, right?”

“Well, yeah...”

“But that is not what I want to talk to you about.”

“It’s not?”

Was there something else I had done? Today I had played with my girl friends, and we didn’t do anything violent. Oh, but yesterday I made one of the boys cry. That must have been it. No, but that was only an accident when we were playing knights... Or maybe she had found out that I had stealthily eaten the strawberry jam?!

As I reflexively moved backwards, my mom stopped me by putting her hands on my shoulders. She was fast. As usual, she had easily stopped my movement and her face was drawing nearer.

“Do you know how you feel about Ash?” As I was finally able to see her, she had a big smile on her face.

“Ash? Uhm... I don’t know... How do I feel about him?” I didn’t understand what she wanted to know. Or rather, I was embarrassed, and I didn’t want to understand.

However, my mom kept pressing on with her witch-like smile. “When I asked you last time how you felt about Ash, you said you didn’t like him. Do you remember that? I think it was in summer.” She tilted her head.

I remembered it. Back then, she was talking about possible candidates to become my husband.

“I was disappointed that you didn’t like anyone I proposed,” she said. She held her hand to her cheek and purposefully let out a sigh.

Back then, we concluded that it was okay if I didn’t like any of them, since I was going to visit the city in the near future, but it looked like my mom was still disappointed. ...And it seemed like her favorite was Ash.

“So, if I asked you again now, I wonder what your answer would be?” she said meaningfully.

Well, now he seems like a lot of fun. I enjoy being around him. ...Could it be? If my mom is suggesting it, then it must be true.

“Could it be... that I... maybe... like Ash?”

My mom was clapping her hands just like she did when I got an answer right during a lesson.

How could my feelings have done this to me? Why did they want my first crush to be the boy that I didn’t like until recently? As their owner, I felt embarrassed. My knees felt weak and I collapsed on the floor.

I was ready to drown in a river of embarrassment when my mom roughly helped me back up. “Stand up, Maika! Now that you have realized your feelings, there is no time to fall over.”

“But... But...”

“No buts! There is no point in acting cute when Ash isn’t around! But I will admit that your reaction just now was adorable.” My mom was talking in a very serious voice—even more serious than when she was teaching me. She looked like she was about to join a battle with sword and shield in her hands. “Love is war! There are no rules and no judges either! You won’t get a pass for crying and you won’t get any mercy for falling down on your knees!” That sounded

different from the love that I had always imagined. Was that really love? It sounded more like the battles in the stories about knights that my dad told me. “Get a hold of yourself, Maika! It is not a good look to get down on your knees as soon as the battle starts!”

“...I don’t know what to say.”

“Just as in war there are losers, in love there are too! It is like your father always says, when you get on your knees on the battlefield, you end up having your head cut off!”

Are you sure you aren’t talking about real war?!

I was flooded with my mom’s energy to a point where I was struggling to keep afloat. Earlier I was drowning in embarrassment from Ash, and now from my mom. It looked like I was going to sink to the ground very soon.

My mom seemed to worry when she saw the tired look on my face. “Maika, it seems like you haven’t fully understood yet.” However, it was more in the sense that she was afraid of pushing me away rather than being worried about me. “I have failed my duties as a mother; I shouldn’t have waited on teaching you about love. But you always looked so lively and didn’t show any interest in these kinds of things...”

I wouldn’t have said I didn’t show any interest; I realized a lot of the boys my age liked me. I was going to reply to her, but I couldn’t get the words out of my mouth. Yeah, I had a little bit of awareness—I was aware that I didn’t have as much interest in love as other girls my age...

My mom tightly grabbed both my cheeks and fixed her gaze. Even at her angriest, she had never done anything like this. “Maika, listen closely. There is only one Ash.” *Yes, it would be strange if there were actually two.* “And there are a lot of other girls who like him!” *That is true; I have heard that too.* “Do you want Ash to be taken by another girl?!”

“No!!” *Absolutely not! Ash needs to take responsibility for having stolen my heart.* Crawling out of the river in which I nearly drowned, I found myself on the battlefield.

As I stood up, my mom looked me in the eyes and strongly grasped my

shoulders. “That’s more like it! You truly are a daughter of the house of Amanobe! From the beginning until the end of time, there will be no defeatists among the daughters of Amanobe in the game of love!”

“Yes!” I wasn’t entirely sure what she was saying, but I agreed. *By the way, what is a defeatist?*

“We need to come up with a strategy!”

“A strategy?” That sounded difficult.

“Yeah, a strategy. Love is war after all. First, we need to gather intelligence regarding our target. From there we can formulate a hunting plan and lay out a trap in advance. Then, once you go out on the hunt, everything will already be in place for it to be a success!” I really didn’t understand what she was saying, but she looked fierce. I was convinced she could have even defeated my dad holding a sword in this state. “I know a lot about the Ash who used to be so quiet until recently, but he has changed a lot,” my mom said. “I have seen a lot of different people in the city, and it looks like Ash is the type to forget all about his surroundings once he becomes absorbed in something.”

“He forgets about his surroundings?” *Including me?*

“Yes. Even for someone as cute as you, I don’t think he will notice you if you just sit around and wait.”

What?! Although he did just let go of my hand earlier as if it was nothing. That must have been because he didn’t acknowledge me as a girl, just like my mom said. *How rude!*

“Yeah, that’s right, Maika. You can’t let yourself get discouraged so easily or it’s your loss. If you feel like he doesn’t acknowledge you, you just have to put in more effort. You have to become more motivated and express your feelings more strongly!”

“Got it!” *Don’t worry! I hate losing so much that I got the seal of approval for being a sore loser from Dad! I’m not going to let anyone take away the victory from me!*



“First, we need to find out what Ash has been absorbed in lately. And then...” My mom took a good look at me from my head to my feet. “We have to polish you up so that he will be instantly charmed when he notices you.”

“Am I not good enough as it is?”

I was a little shocked to hear this even coming from my mom.

“Your appearance is fine but... Maika, what did you think about your own study progress after seeing Ash?” Being compared to Ash was an even more devastating shock. Having completely gouged my heart, my mom tilted her head with a worried look. “Do you know why I thought Ash was a good fit to be your husband? It is because he is so extraordinarily intelligent. If you are going to engage in a battle with someone like him, you need to get to the same level.”

“The same level?” The same level as Ash? That goal was very, very, far away. I felt as if I had been left alone in the deep forest at night. But then... I remembered his smile. It was as if its bright light was showing me the way towards the goal. Like a candle, like the stars, like the sun—the light was letting me know that there was something ahead. I wanted to walk towards it. “I’ll do my best!”

I was prepared to set off towards the light shining far away in the distance.

“Right now, you have a beautiful expression on your face.” My mom was gently patting my head. I hoped that someday Ash would do the same. “It’s decided then! We will start studying tomorrow!”

“Tomorrow?”

As soon as I heard the word ‘studying,’ I let out a moan.

“What’s wrong?” She was smiling as if to say, ‘Do you have any complaints?’

I did, but I was going to keep them to myself. When I looked away, my mom let out a defeated sigh. *But I hate studying!*

“If you are going to be like this, you will never catch up to Ash.”

“I know. I will really do my best.” *If only I could study together with Ash... If I studied with someone who is having as much fun as he is, I might also enjoy myself a little bit.*

“That might actually be a good idea!” It seemed that my mom had picked up on the words that I had mumbled under my breath while letting out a sigh. “You are right—if you are with someone else, it might be easier for you to remember things. Especially if you are with someone you like, studying is much more fun. I remember how fun it was together with Klein... I mean, your father.”

She was nodding her head while smiling. *Really? Like, really?*

“Next time Ash is at the church, you should go and join him!” she proposed.

“What?! No way! He is gonna find out how stupid I am!”

“I am sure he already knows.”

How cruel! Even though I kept complaining to her, she wouldn’t listen at all.

When my dad came back home, she told him there was good news and they went back to their room. *How unfair. I mean, I complained, but I never said I wouldn’t go. It’s not like I don’t like the idea. You could say I’m even a little thankful.*

Also, it seemed like my dad had gone out to search for me when I hadn’t come back in time. I was really grateful to my parents. Unrelated to Ash, I decided that it was time for me to become more mature.



There was a common point between modern letters and those of the early-period ancient civilization—most researchers seemed to agree on this. That in itself was not particularly strange, considering that there was a link between modern civilization and the late period of ancient civilization, and that the latter had taken over knowledge from the early period. It also was not unusual that letters had been lost going from the early period to the late period, and then again from the late period to modern times. In the case of phonograms, there were certain sounds that disappeared over time. Due to the spread of spoken dialects, people stopped differentiating between certain sounds that used to be clearly distinct in the past. The problem with the language of the early period was that a large amount of the letters had disappeared. It was also possible that the shape of our vocal organs had greatly changed over time. Judging from the sheer amount of letters in the language of the early period, it was not

inconceivable that people back then looked closer to lizards or octopuses, and used unique sounds that modern humans were no longer able to pronounce. However, that explanation seemed unlikely to me.

I was pondering to myself while pulling out weeds from the field.

“Whatcha think, Ash? Ya books can do this?” Also pulling weeds next to me was my father, David, annoy—I mean, passionately explaining to me. “Readin’ books won’t make any new spring crops. If ya got time for that, might as well look after the field. That’s what ya call a proper man. Like how we’ve been doin’ for generations.”

He was a narrow-minded—I mean, *serious* man. He said that this was what we had been doing for generations, but if I remembered correctly, he had boasted before about my great-uncle working as a soldier in the city, so it was not like he was particularly proud of being a farmer. Most likely, he did not have the talent to do anything else. Not that I thought being a farmer was bad compared to being a soldier! Farming was an essential job in any civilized society.

“You are correct. Reading books won’t make the harvest any better.”

“Right! Books are a waste of time! They make ya lazy!”

However, my father did not have any understanding for books. *Someday I will make him regret—I mean, I will convince him.*

While occasionally throwing in appropriate interjections to show that I was listening, I continued the work in the field.

Interestingly enough, the farming in this village was quite scientific. It was a lot more advanced than you would have expected if you judged the level of development purely from the material conditions and conversations of the villagers. I wasn’t that familiar with farming practices myself, but they used a crop rotation in this village. On top of that, it was a fairly advanced version, commonly known as the ‘Norfolk four-course system.’ If I remembered correctly, this farming system had only become mainstream in relatively recent times. Of course, depending on the region, there would have been places where people had worked this out over time from their long past experiences. As such, it was not much of a surprise that it had found its way even to a remote village

like this.

However, seeing how simple my own father was, I had another theory. Was it possible that this was a farming system used by the ancient civilizations?

I had no idea how both ancient civilizations had crumbled. According to official sources, they had been destroyed by demons, which I found hard to believe, but since even now there were holdovers from those periods, maybe a small group of their people had survived. While most of their culture had been taken away by the tyrant called time, they had managed to protect their cultivating systems.

Thinking back, I realized that I had come across several concepts these past nine years that had seemed strangely advanced. Suddenly, I had expectations for the legacy of the ancient civilization. There was a glimmer of hope to return to the affluent days of my past-life memories, which had seemed forever lost, even if it was only a small fraction of it.

“Maybe I could use this to help decipher the ancient language,” I murmured. *A while back, I said very maturely that I shouldn’t dream too big, but I’m still only a nine-year-old child! There’s nothing wrong with dreaming big!*

Considering the current social conditions of the village, I did not have a very high life expectancy. My father was only in his mid-twenties, but he looked at least ten years older. Once you reached your forties, you were already treated as an elderly person, and anyone older than sixty was considered a ghost. Life here was short—I was going to dream big and use all my resources to achieve my goals.

“Time for a break, Ash.”

Finally, it was time for a break. For a developing child, this workload was harsh. *I don’t remember any nine-year-olds complaining about their hips cracking in my past life.*

While stretching my back, I drew a mark next to my feet with a wooden branch that I was carrying around for work. The mark signified that I had finished my work up to that point. My father and all the other farmers did the same. It was not just a simple line, but some sort of symbol. My father, who despised books, referred to it as a charm to improve the harvest which had

been passed down since ancient times. An irrational custom like a charm was much more befitting of this village's level of civilization.

However, I did not dislike that charm. In a severe life like this, having something that could make you feel at ease without any real reason seemed necessary. I was glad that it was something as harmless as a mark on the ground. If it were something as barbaric as a blood sacrifice, I was not convinced I could have lived this long. Therefore, as I said, I liked that charm.

"...Wait a minute." When I gently stared at the mark, I realized something. Could this have been some sort of letter? "Wow."

I was impressed at my own sudden discovery. If it was possible that this farming system originated in the ancient civilization, it would not have been a far stretch to think that the charm used by the farmers, who had taken over their methods, was also a remnant of that time. *The preconditions are quite dubious, but given that there are no other clues, let me engage in a little thought exercise.*

If it had been a letter, what could it have meant? Considering it was used to mean 'abundant harvest,' it most likely would have been 'abundant,' or 'praying,' or 'protecting from bad harvest.' On the other hand, it may not have had any relation to its function as a charm, and just meant 'ending,' since it was used at the end of the work. Would there have been this much meaning to a simple mark? Maybe it was an abbreviation. Or it was possible that over the years a part of the original mark had disappeared.

It was also not uncommon to just use the initials instead of a long formal name in a conversation. Or it was also possible that there were originally several letters which had been shortened and combined. You often saw this with company logos, where the initials of the name had been fused into a symbol. In the case of a logo, I was actually tempted to classify it as an ideogram. Even though it was supposed to be a mix of phonograms, it was closer to a picture or figure, and it expressed the entire company name with a single shape.

There were too many possibilities to narrow it down. At that moment, it was beyond my capacities to find an explanation. Nevertheless, I had realized

something. Compared with the modern language, there were far too many letters in the book from the early-period ancient civilization that Father Folke had shown me. Could it have been that the ancient language was a mix of ideograms and phonograms, just like kanji and hiragana?

As soon as I had finished the farming work for the day, I ran towards Father Folke with my father's jeers echoing in the background.

"Father Folke, I have realized something!" He seemed taken aback by me rushing into his private study at once, but all was fine. I was calm; I just had gained a little momentum. "There is a charm that is used for farm work—"

"Wait, calm down! What are you talking about?"

I'm fine. I'm calm. Just be quiet and listen. Don't move. Give me a pen. What are you doing? Hurry up. "This is the mark that is used as a charm. Does it not look too complicated to be a shape? Does it not rather look like a letter?"

"Oh! Yeah, I can see it being a letter."

"But we do not use these types of letters, so I thought that maybe it was from the ancient language, and if it was from the ancient language, I was wondering what it could mean on its own, and when I could not think of an explanation, that was when it hit me!" *Phew!* I thought I was going to die saying it all in one breath. It looked like Father Folke had calmed down during my fiery speech; he had fallen silent with his mouth closed. I controlled my breathing and got ready to talk about the most important part. "What if the letters of the ancient language that we cannot read are not actually letters but pictures?"

"Wait, what do you mean? They aren't letters?" I could see on Father Folke's once again healthy and handsome face that he was beginning to comprehend the meaning of my words. "They aren't letters, but pictures... What does that mean? Pictures usually don't look like that, and they aren't in between letters— isn't that so?"

"Yeah, you are right. I was using pictures more as an example. It would be letters that resemble pictures."

"Hmm... letters that resemble pictures—meaning... I'm sorry, I can't imagine

it.”

In theory, it was not that difficult to understand, but without the concept of ideograms, it was only normal to end up with a puzzled look on your face like Father Folke did.

“It is easier to understand if you do not think about it too much. Let’s see... How about we try having a conversation with letters resembling pictures?”

After making a start sign, I first pointed towards Father Folke.

“Me? I?” he guessed.

I continued to gesture as he guessed the meaning.

“Have”

“Am”

Next, I pointed towards me.

“Ash?” he asked.

“And”

“And Ash...?” he put together.

Somehow it had become really silly, but I decided to go through with it. I repeatedly opened my mouth and gestured as if I was talking.

“Open your mouth...? No, ‘talking’? It is ‘talking,’ right?”

“Yes!” I nodded in agreement and read out loud the conversation. “I just signaled the sentence ‘Father Folke and I are talking.’ If I were to put it into writing, it would look something like this.” I wrote it down on a piece of paper, which I had borrowed in a motion that may have looked like snatching. I turned the words ‘Father Folke,’ ‘I/Ash,’ and ‘talking’ into deformed characters resembling people and linked them with particles in the form of regular letters. “Can you understand it?”

“Oh, yeah. I guess you should say ‘read’ in this case. I’ve heard of puzzles like this before.” Once the meaning of the odd exchange from earlier had become clear, Father Folke was staring at the paper in awe. “I think I understand it now. What you referred to as letters resembling pictures earlier is that part that

looks like a picture of a person.”

“You are right. That part that looks like a picture means ‘Father Folke’ on its own. That is an amount of information we cannot express with a single letter of the language we know.”

“This is... How should I put it? Quite interesting. And you are saying that something like this might have been used in the early period of the ancient civilization?” As I nodded, Father Folke started to inspect the validity of the hypothesis inside his head. I could tell from the enthusiastic nods that he seemed to agree with a lot of the components. “Interesting. Indeed a splendid idea. Do you remember that last time we talked we also came to the conclusion that there were too many letters?”

“Yes. It is an unnatural amount if you assume them to be purely letters expressing sounds. It makes you think that the people back then may have been able to utter completely different sounds which we can no longer reproduce.”

“And this unnaturalness could be explained by these picture-like letters expressing ideas... What should we call them? How about pictographs for now? So, if you use these pictographs to fill in the unnatural amount of blanks, the text could become coherent.”

“That is what I think.”

I wondered if we were right. Personally, I was getting more and more excited thinking we were on the right track.

Father Folke, on the other hand, kept a serious look on his face. “I can’t believe it.”

“What is it?”

“I can’t believe I didn’t see it.”

“You did not see it?”

He was shaking his head up and down repeatedly. “It is only a hunch...” he murmured, but he could no longer keep a straight face. “It’s only a feeling, but we might have a huge breakthrough here!” He was shouting with exultation and a big smile on his face. “This is amazing! We have a lot of work to do. How

are we going to prove this? I can't wait to prove this!"

"Father Folke, please calm down for a bit!" *Don't shake the body of a delicate little child!*

"Haha! This is the best! You're the best, Ash!"

What I could not believe was not the clue for the decipherment, but rather the manner of his frolicking. *Either way, I'm glad I could make you so happy. Let us do our best to decipher this language. At the end of the day, books only come to life once you have read them.*

Chapter 2: Thus Spoke the Page

Ever since then, Father Folke had been passionately engaging with the ancient language. Since he was likely to just cling to his work desk if left to his own devices, even forgetting to sleep and eat, I cautioned him not to revert to his former zombie priest self. I told him that not getting enough sleep was inefficient, as it weakened his ability to think. I also told him that not eating made him slower on the uptake. I could have told him that it was shortening his life span as well, but that probably would not have been very effective. Besides the average life span being (probably) quite short in this world, there was also a high death rate from illness. I could not have blamed anyone for wanting to do things as fast as possible in a world where they did not know whether they were going to be alive the next day. I was also aware that because of this I was probably living more in the present compared to my past life.

“Hey, Ash! If ya got time to read, come ’n ’elp! Readin’ books will only make ya a lazy bum. And lazy bums a’nt gonna find wives!”

So, in spring, when work in the fields had increased and my father interrupted my rather sparse reading time, I was ready to ki—*kindly* push and roll him over. Very kindly. Of course, I was not actually going to do this. At least not yet...

“Of course, Father. What do you need me to do?” I replied obediently and my father smiled.

“Quid’s here. Gonna bring him the winter wheat.”

“Oh, Quid has come. It is already that time again.”

Quid was a peddler who frequently visited the village. Going at a slow pace by carriage, there was a large city about half a day away from here, or so I had heard. I had never actually been there or even seen it from far away, but I assumed it existed. Given the proximity, one might have thought that the farmers carried their produce directly to the city to sell them at the morning markets, but that was not the case. Instead, a merchant like Quid came to the village to buy produce and sell it in the city. He was also selling commodities in

the village that he had brought from the city. It seemed that in the city transactions were mostly made with money, whereas in the village it was closer to bartering. With the peddler acting as a middleman, the produce was sold at a lower price in the village than in the city. It was unfortunate, but otherwise, the merchant would not have been able to turn a profit and make a living. The question was why were the villagers willing to pay a middleman.

“Ey, Quid! Looks like once again the demons didn’t get ya!”

“Haha, yes. I am quite confident in my ability to outrun them.”

You probably could have guessed the answer from their little exchange—although I could not. I had been wondering for a while now what exactly those demons were supposed to be. Were they a metaphor for dangerous animals or bandits? Or were they indeed something worse? I had inquired about it before, but from the answers I had received, I was not able to tell whether it was just a story made up to scare children into obeying or a warning for a real threat. *I wish they didn’t treat me like a child when asking serious questions. I mean, I am a child, but still...*

We laid the bundles of winter wheat in front of Quid so he could check the volume of the harvest. “Yes, this is indeed very dense; excellent wheat. And with this amount, I can offer you four copper. How does that sound?”

As always, he did not properly weigh the produce. Weight measurements existed in this world, but it looked like he did not bother to carry around a scale. The transactions were built on a bond of certain trust, as there was a risk of being refused business if you tried to deceive the other person.

My father promptly started picking out goods worth four copper coins. “How much for salt?” he asked.

“One jar is 12 iron. I’m afraid prices go up in winter.”

One copper coin was worth 20 iron ones. The stability of the currency value was most likely due to the absence of counterfeit circulation. However, it was strange that there even was a monetary economy considering the current level of civilization.

“If ya say so. How ‘bout the usual herbs? And whetstones.”

“A set of the usual spices is 15 iron. The whetstone is eight iron. Do you not need any medicine?”

“Yeah, fever med’cine is lo’.”

“One bottle is eight iron coins.”

My father groaned with a solemn face while wistfully looking towards a porcelain bottle of alcohol.

“Ah, yes, the mead would be 20 iron,” said the merchant.

That was quite steep for a luxury item that was likely only going to last for a night, but that was to be expected. Mead was different from our homebrewed ale. In this world, homebrewed ale had no other value than replacing drinking water. You could have even said that there were not any worse free drinks, as drinking pure water entailed certain risks. Essentially, homebrewed ale had a strange taste even though it was free. Compared to that, Quid’s alcohol was the real deal; it was possible to actually enjoy drinking it. In a village where pleasures were few and far between, delicious alcohol had the power to drive people mad. Although you could have said that this was the case in any world.

“Couldn’t I give in jus’ a lil’? Just a lil’ bit...”

“Oh? Is that all already?”

“No, not yet...”

Seeing the pitiful look on my father’s face, I pointed towards one of the goods lined up. “We should get that piece of cloth before thinking about any alcohol, or mother will get angry.”

“What? Ah, right. Haha, y’ere a good boy, Ash!”

It was not necessarily the finest piece of cloth; most likely it was a scrap or leftovers from the fabric used by a tailor in the city. However, it was still good enough to fix worn-out clothes, to use as a dust cloth, or to cover up the cracks in the house.

“Would it be possible to get two needles for free as an extra?” I asked.

“Give me a break, boy! A cloth is ten iron and two needles are an extra six.”

This was all we needed. The right thing to do would have been to have the rest paid out in cash and save it for emergencies.

My father was always trying to buy—and on several occasions had bought—alcohol, which always led to him getting scolded by my mother. I was on her side. Simply put, he was a hopeless case who was still regretfully looking towards the bottle of mead.

“Not t’day, I guess...” he mumbled.

“I’m afraid that if I go any lower in price, I will end up starving myself to death.” Quid pursed his lips while shaking his head. He stole a glance at my father, who had dropped his shoulders in disappointment. “Although... if I don’t sell this bottle soon, it will go to waste. And since it doesn’t look like anyone else wants to buy it, I will throw it in as a bonus!”

“Really?!”

“Only today, Mr. David! And make sure not to tell anyone else, okay? I can’t cut everyone a deal like this.”

And thus, with a grin on his face, my father had used all of the money, which we probably should have saved.

“Are you okay with this, Father?”

“Shut up! Adults are talkin’! ‘Dis is fuel to any workin’ man!”

What reasoning! There was nothing I really could have said to object. More than anything, I understood that some form of comfort was necessary in this world. Anyway, he was going to have to face the wrath of his wife later.

“What about you, Quid?” I asked him.

“Haha! As a merchant, I can’t really say I won’t sell the good that the customer has decided to buy.”

“No, I was asking you regarding the price.”

“Hm? Oh, well, even if I took it back to the city, I doubt there would be anyone willing to buy it. And by the time of my next trip, it would already have gone off, so I might as well give it as a bonus!”

“Is that so?” I’m not finished with you yet, merchant Quid—I’ve been waiting for this moment. My face muscles naturally started smiling when I thought about the taste of the prey that had just walked into my trap. Quietly, I walked next to Quid, who was standing behind the goods, and whispered into his ears. *“I’m afraid you calculated the wrong price.”*

In that instant, not a single muscle on his face was moving, but I thought I heard his breathing stop.

“What do you mean?” he carefully asked.

“That’s not like you; you have always been so good at math. Not counting the bottle of mead, the total price for our purchased goods should be 59 iron coins.”

12 for the salt, 15 for the spices, eight for the whetstone, eight for the medicine, ten for the cloth, and six for the needles: amounting to a total of 59 iron coins. There was no mistake. On the other hand, our winter wheat was valued at four copper coins, or 80 iron ones. Even if he had included the bottle of mead at the mentioned price, there still should have been some change left over.

As a matter of fact, I was on alert, as I had been suspecting Quid of overcharging his customers for a while now. On a previous occasion like this, when there had been only a few customers, I had overheard Quid miscalculating. Back then, I had thought that it was me who had gotten the numbers wrong, as it had not even been my own shopping. However, since it had bothered me, I had made it a habit to double-check his calculations, and he had done it again. This time, I was sure that it was a premeditated crime. He purposefully chose victims who could not do math themselves and engaged them when there were not many other customers—or rather witnesses—around. And given that there were barely any villagers who knew how to do math, he did not have to be picky either.

It was the same this time: my father David did not know how to calculate, and on top of that, he had made several smaller purchases, which made it even more complicated. Therefore, Quid must have thought that he could get away with swindling us out of a few iron coins—that must have been what he

expected. However, what he did not expect was that the boy who accompanied David knew how to do math. If needed, I could have even recited the multiplication table from memory, but it did not seem like that would have been appreciated by either of them.

“By the way, this is just small talk, but lately I have been quite friendly with Father Folke. If you happened to imprudently swindle me or my father, I probably would have to go pray at the church out of sheer sadness,” I said meaningfully.

Since the priest of the temple church oversaw all the important ceremonial occasions in the village, he had a strong influence. If that priest were to cast doubt on the peddler’s reputation, the longstanding trust towards the latter would have crumbled in an instant. In a village, where most people did not know any math, trade could only take place if everyone trusted the merchant not to tell lies. What would have happened if that trust were betrayed? Most likely, people would no longer have wanted to engage with that particular merchant. After all, there were many others out there.

If Quid messed up, there was surely going to be another peddler coming to replace him and fulfill the demands of the village; the lives of the villagers would not have been affected by such a change at all. The only reason they had not started trading with a new peddler without any track record already was that they felt Quid was less likely to betray them.

“Everything is fine, Mr. Quid. It was only an honest mistake, right?” I asked in a kind and thoughtful voice.

Of course, I was currently his best ally. The only one who had noticed his ‘miscalculations’ so far was me. If I stayed silent, this highly-trusted peddler could still save himself.

With that in mind, I pushed my advantage. “Making mistakes is only human. Even an experienced merchant like you can make one or two mistakes... Oh, that is right, I noticed you also got the prices wrong with Johil last time. And before that, I think it was Ban, the hunter.”

I was letting him know that I was aware this was not his first offense. At this, his face started to turn pale. *You don’t have to be afraid of me; I’m on your side.*

Hehe. “You are a trustworthy peddler who has been truly kind to this village up to now. I will keep this to myself.”

“Re-Really?”

I put on a reassuring smile and gave my word to the poor, frightened peddler. “So I hope you will be a good peddler who earns my trust from here on out.” *If you earn my trust, you won’t have to rely on the trust from the other villagers. You know what that means, right?* I drew back my face, which had been close enough to his ears that my father could not have heard anything.

I tilted my head to check for a response, and luckily it seemed like Quid, the peddler, had received the message. “Young boy... I mean, Ash, that was indeed a remarkably interesting story. Let me get you something as a sign of gratitude.”

I looked at the bundle of cloth that I had bought earlier and then glimpsed at a more expensive fabric.

“Oh, would you like this cloth?”

“Can I really have something so exquisite? I am sure my mother will be extremely pleased. Thank you so much, Mr. Quid!”

And thus, the deal was concluded. I did not intend to blackmail him for price reductions in the future—as long as he was going to ask for the correct price, I was perfectly happy. I assumed he was going to take this into consideration when calculating the price, and I was not going to refuse a good deal. After all, I was still a nine-year-old child; if an adult was going to spoil me, I would of course take advantage of it.

Grinning to myself, I gathered our shopping and headed towards my father, who had no idea what had happened. I composed myself and explained to him. “I told Mr. Quid an interesting story I read in a book. It looks like that was also a valuable commodity to a peddler. He gave me this fabric as a token of gratitude.”

“Oh, I see. What story?”

“I am afraid I cannot tell you, even considering you are my father. I sold it to Quid, so if you want to hear it, you will have to buy it from him.”

My father seemed to be quite intrigued, but not enough to pay money for the story. Although I doubted that Quid would have sold it at all, no matter how much he was offered.

“By the way, Father.”

“Ye-Yeah?”

“You were right—reading books will not improve the harvest,” with a big smile, I was ready to deliver the final blow, “but they can make Mother happy. I believe that is an extremely valuable skill.”

In that moment, my father stared at me in disbelief. He had not yet understood the value of books, but it was only a matter of time—a very short amount of time. To be precise, the time it took for us to get back home and meet the wrath of my mother after finding out about the bottle of mead worth one copper coin. I was sure my father would be deeply grateful once I put her back into a good mood by offering her the expensive fabric.

Ever since our encounter with Quid, my father had stopped complaining about me reading books. He was still grumbling to himself, but he no longer confronted me. I was satisfied with myself. Once again, life in this world had become a little more comfortable. As a result, I was able to walk towards Father Folke with a light-footed step.

“Father Folke, have you been properly eating?”

“Are we married?”

You realize you are talking to a child? I was only worried about the health of a certain absorbed researcher whom I respected very much. Also, same-sex marriage was not legal in this world. “You sound ridiculous.”

“It’s because you keep lecturing me. You are quite insolent to meddle with adult affairs like this.”

“Considering that a child is currently worrying about you, you should probably re-evaluate your capability to manage your own life before talking about ‘adult affairs.’”

“You really have a way with words.”

That was a reasonable assumption considering that I was probably older than him if I included my age from my past life.

“So, have you been able to read anything?” I asked.

“Unfortunately not; I haven’t deciphered a single letter,” he said with a surprisingly radiant expression. Compared to his gloomy spirit in winter, it looked like he was enjoying himself simply engaging in research. “But it’s not like I haven’t made any progress; I found a few symbols that look like names and keep reappearing in the text.”

“Oh! That seems like a good starting point.”

“Indeed. This seems to be the fastest way to decipherment, just like you suggested.”

Previously, when talking to Father Folke, I had suggested starting by looking for proper nouns which repeatedly appeared as a first step to decipher the ancient language. I had thought that it was possible that the phonograms might function as particles, similar to Japanese. Once you knew a noun, it was possible to look for corresponding content in sources from the later period of ancient civilization.

For example, if you were able to find the name of a god whom people still worshiped today, it was likely that the surrounding text corresponded to the content of current scriptures. It was a smart way to quickly progress at once. Of course, I was not the first person to come up with this technique; I had heard of it before in my past life. However, I did not have the perseverance to engage in the large task of solving a cryptic ancient language; I was going to leave that to our dear Champollion from another world.

“So, what book are you going to read today?” Father Folke asked.

“Let me have a look.”

“Of course, I signed a contract after all.” Father Folke nodded with a wry smile. I could not help but smile myself, remembering our first encounter.

I took out several books and sat down in a chair in the chapel to read. That

day, I was not going to borrow a novel, but rather a book that contained some common knowledge. Travel diaries and autobiographies from noblemen looked quite interesting too. From those, you could obtain a variety of knowledge with some lies sprinkled in between. Surprisingly, there were also more technical books about farming, smithing, and construction. It was entirely possible that a lot of knowledge had been passed down from the ancient civilization. However, there was no one who could read those books, and those who could read them were not likely to engage in manual labor, so the knowledge was effectively lost.

The moment I took out a botanical guide, someone else entered the chapel. It was unusual for anyone to stop by outside of ceremonies. When I looked up, I saw a girl my age.

“Oh, hello there, Maika.”

The person who had timidly entered and looked around the church was Lady Maika.

“Oh, hey, Ash.”

It looked like she was nervous, perhaps because she was not used to visiting the church. The priest was a bit of an oddball, but the building itself was still a solemn religious place. If there had been proper teaching seminars, there probably would have also been a space arranged for children.

Lady Maika seemed unsure of what to do once inside, so I tried to reassure her with a smile on my face. “Are you looking for Father Folke? He is at the back, in his study.”

“Oh, okay. Tha-Thank you! Uhm...”

Lady Maika kept just standing still, playing with her ponytail. It was charming to watch her nervousness come out like this; it reminded me of watching that TV show where children would go on their first errand.

However charming it was, though, just letting her stand there would have been rude, so, as a gentleman, I sent out a rescue boat, saying, “Do you want me to go and get Father Folke?”

“Ah, no!”

My rescue boat was rejected by the motion of her shaking her head and hands. It looked like she just refused without even thinking about it, which was a normal behavior for someone extremely nervous.

However, after having been frozen for a while, she said with a red face, “I’m sorry. If you don’t mind, could you call him?”

“As you wish, my Lady.”

I tried answering slightly jokingly to put her at ease, but I was not sure it had worked. It felt so out of character that I shivered with embarrassment.

“Father Folke, Maika is here. It looks like she wants to talk to you.”

“Maika? Was she supposed to come here?” He looked clueless as he came out of his study, scratching his head. “Hello, Maika. What brings you here?” He was speaking in a soft voice. Why was his attitude so different compared to when he talked to me? When I first came in, he called me a stupid brat. Was the zombie priest maybe also a lolicon priest?

“Uhm... I want to learn how to read... Could you teach me, maybe...?” Lady Maika spoke timidly while her ears turned red, and she kept glancing in my direction.

By now, the whole village seemed to know that I had learned how to read. Considering how often I visited the church, it was not surprising that this would have become a widely-discussed topic.

Lady Maika must have overheard this. As the daughter of the village chief, who was supposed to know how to read and write, she must have felt some pressure hearing that the son of a farmer had done so before her.

Surely, it was awkward for her to be in the same room as me. Father Folke must have guessed the same thing, as he gave me a sideways look of acknowledgment.

Wait a minute. What’s up with that mischievous smile? Don’t frighten an innocent girl like that!

Most people in the village did not like studying—I was the exception to that rule.

“In that case, I will help you in my capabilities as a priest. Education is part of my duties, after all.”

It was unusual to see him this enthusiastic considering he had not wanted to teach me at all, and even though he was currently quite busy with deciphering the ancient language. I was a little worried seeing how serious he was about teaching Maika, especially knowing Father Folke, who was another hopeless case, albeit in a different sense than my father.

“Yes, Father Folke is an excellent teacher.” I praised him in an attempt to cut off his retreat. *I’ll root for you, Lady Maika. It may be difficult, but if you persevere, you will be able to read so many wonderful books.*

However, for some reason Father Folke cut into my path. “Unfortunately, I am quite busy, so I won’t be able to teach you all the time. Luckily, Ash here also knows how to read and write.”

Why?

“Yeah, he seems like a good substitute,” he continued. “You both are close in age, so I imagine it is easier to talk to him. Ash, you don’t mind, right?”

Wait a minute, was it not going to be awkward for Lady Maika with me around?

“Yeah, if you are busy, I can ask Ash...” It looked like she reluctantly agreed.

I was trying to find a way to save her from this situation, but Father Folke quickly wrapped things up. “It is decided then! Ash, you are my best disciple; don’t disappoint me!”

“Wow, what an honor to be your best disciple! I guess I should call you Master Folke!”

What a blockhead! No wonder he still was not married. With an attitude like that, he was bound to become the Master of Solitude.

Father Folke, or the Master of Solitude, was cruel. The next day, he already put me in charge of teaching. There were not any ceremonies going on at the time, so it must have been purely to engage with his research. What a slacker. I

felt like it was time to resume the holy war.

However, there were also some mitigating circumstances that prevented the war from breaking out. My father had been told by the village chief that I was going to tutor his daughter. As a result, the same man who had been grumbling about me reading books told me to take it slow with the manual work and sent me off to church. I felt refreshed! Since I did not have to work as much, my head was clear, and I was able to take some time to read for myself while teaching. While it may have been awkward to Lady Maika, it was a trivial problem that I tried to make her forget.

“Let us get started then!”

“Yes, please go ahead, Ash.”

Lady Maika still looked nervous, so I tried speaking in a soft voice and with a smile on my face. People mostly formed their impressions from looking at someone’s outward appearance, and, to a lesser extent, from listening to the tone of their voice. The content of the conversation was mostly influenced by those impressions, so what you were saying was not actually that important. Or at least I remembered hearing something like that from my past life.

“Different studying methods work for different people, but how about we start by using the same book that I first read?”

“The one that you first read?”

“Yes, the one that Father—I mean, Master Folke let me borrow.”

Well, he *did* let me borrow it, but refused to explain anything. *What a great teacher!*

I handed her the book of prayers which was used during ceremonies—Father Folke’s manuscript which had taught me so much.

Lady Maika took the thin book and stared at it as if she was deeply moved. “The book that you read...”

I saw enthusiasm spilling from her gaze. She had made her first step towards the world of reading. I understood the excitement of learning something new. While I had been dragged into this situation and was not too eager at first, I

started to become motivated.

“In this book there are all kinds of prayers that Master Folke uses during ceremonies. You probably have heard them before, so it should not be too difficult to remember them; that was the reason why I chose it.”

“How clever.”

“It was just a hunch I had.”

There was no need to flatter me that much. It was probably for the best to quickly proceed with the lesson.

“I think that, for a start, it would be good to choose a phrase or some words that you are familiar with. Do you have any favorite prayers?”

“What about the one you read first?”

“That would be this one.”

It was a basic prayer. Usually, it was used when something good had happened and you wanted to express your joy. I was not particularly religious myself, so I had rarely used it.

“Can we start with that one?” Lady Maika asked.

“If you are fine with it, sure. So, let us look at it one by one.” First, I started with the phrase ‘Strong wolf god.’ While reading out loud, I traced the letters with my finger to show which sounds corresponded to them. “So this reads ‘strong,’ followed by ‘wolf,’ and then ‘god.’ And all together it is ‘Strong wolf god.’”

I wondered if she was going to understand it this way. I took a look at her face while she was staring at the book. As expected, she did not seem to get it right away, as she gave me back a puzzled look.

“Let us look at it again word by word. So this is ‘strong.’ ...Maika, are you listening?”

“Oh, yeah! Sorry! This is ‘strong,’ right?”

“Yes, exactly. And then we have ‘wolf’ and ‘god’ next, which gives us the phrase ‘Strong wolf god.’ Since the wolf god is very healthy and vigorous, he is

often worshiped before hard physical work or childbirth.” I did not want to cram too much at once, so I tried to lighten the mood with some small talk.

“So that’s what ‘strong’ means...” she muttered.

I was slightly caught off guard when she murmured this with a surprised expression. *I see. We have to start there.*

At the same time, her face turned red, as she seemed to think that she had said something embarrassing.

I tried my best to stay serious; if I had rolled my eyes in front of a child like her, she would have ended up being hurt. *And yes, I realize I’m a child her age, too.*

I was not sure how successful it was, but I tried to just carry on the conversation in a cheerful tone. “You can also use ‘strong’ to describe your feelings.”

“I see... Uhm...”

“Feel free to ask me anything. And if I do not know the answer, we can just go and ask Master Folke,” I followed up desperately. It would not be beneficial for our future lessons if she thought it was embarrassing to ask questions.

“What about ‘Wise monkey god?’” Lady Maika asked.

It seemed like I had put her at ease a bit. She was still embarrassed, but over time I was sure we could get to a point where she would ask me questions without hesitation.

“‘Wise’ means that he is intelligent. For example, you could pray to the monkey god when you are studying like we are now, so he will share some of his intelligence with us.”

“Oh! Then maybe I should go ahead and pray!” Lady Maika gave me a shy smile, which I wholeheartedly reciprocated.

I was relieved. The road ahead looked rocky, but I was sure we were going to be alright. I could not wait for Lady Maika to start reading books on her own. I now understood why Father Folke had been so happy to talk to me about deciphering the ancient language. After all, it was much more fun to be able to

share your interests with someone else.

We continued studying for a while afterwards, but once the sun started to set, we called it a night. Father Folke had ordered me to accompany Lady Maika home, as it was already quite dark, so we were both currently walking towards the village chief's house. As a gentleman, I had no problem walking her home, but I wondered why that priest had such a smirk on his face.

"What book are you currently reading?" Lady Maika asked me about the book I was holding in my hands. By the way, Lady Maika was holding a manuscript in the same way. I had told her to go over and practice writing the parts we had covered today.

"This book explains a lot of things about trees and plants."

"Oh, I didn't know there were books like that."

"Yes, there are all sorts of books! There are books about everything that exists in this world! And even things that do not exist!"

"Things that do not exist? What do you mean?"

Lady Maika looked confused. The gods in the book she was carrying right now were also things that did not exist in this world. *Right? Gods don't exist. I'm pretty sure they don't.*

Thinking about it, I realized that in this world it was much harder to outright deny the existence of gods than in my past life. *Maybe I should try respecting religion a bit more, just in case. Praying is free, after all.*

While I was pondering metaphysical questions, Lady Maika had already moved on to the next question. "So, is that book interesting?"

"Yes, very much. And it can be useful, too!"

"Trees and plants can be useful?"

This botanical guide did not just list all sorts of flora, but it also explained which ones were edible or could be used as medicine, so it was quite useful. It also included a lot of plants that were not native to this region, but I had also come across some species which I remembered having seen before. If all went

to plan, there was a chance that this poor village was going to have an expanded menu. And maybe we no longer would have to rely on Quid's medicine—either one would be reason for joy.

Finding plants for medicine was especially urgent. It was not so much that Quid's medicine was expensive, but rather that it did not work that well. At least, it had never worked for me. My parents said that it worked for them, but I was convinced it was merely a placebo effect.

When I explained something along those lines to Lady Maika, she was also convinced of its usefulness.

“Wow! That's amazing!”

“Yes, books are amazing!”

Seeing the excitement on the face of this innocent young girl made me happy.

Soon it was going to be the season for gathering wild edible plants. I looked forward to making use of my newfound knowledge. It was the start of an expedition to name all kinds of weeds that had so far been ignored.

Finally, the day of gathering edible plants had arrived.

Groups of children entered the outskirts of the woods to find ingredients. Following the lead of comparatively older children, everyone participating had congregated. From the outside, it must have looked like a fun picnic, but everyone's eyes looked as dead and resigned as those of a salaryman leaving for work. Their sense of duty was competing with their worries.

Anyone who had experienced at least one season of gathering edible plants would have turned out like this—it was extremely exhausting and dangerous. Every year someone was caught up in an accident, and every other year someone died. Therefore, we were made to form small groups so that we could observe each other and make sure no one was going to wander too far off into the woods.

This time, I was the leader of my group. I was still among the younger kids, but I was specially selected because I had managed to spot a person who nearly was separated from his group last year. Compared to the other children, I had a

lot of self-restraint, as you might have expected considering who I really was.

Anyway, this was to my liking, because the group leader had the right to choose the area where they were going to search. I was going to make as much use as possible of the botanical guide that I had borrowed from Father Folke.

“Let us start by going over there! If I remember correctly, there were a lot of plants growing near the bracken,” I told the two slightly older boys in my group, who agreed with a sour look on their faces.

They were only one or two years older, but they seemed to be bothered by the fact that they were being led around by someone younger. *Just bear with me. Mentally I’m much older than both of you.*

Before setting off, I checked my equipment again. I had made a makeshift shoulder bag out of my spare jacket, where I kept the book. Everything seemed fine.

When I was getting ready to depart, I heard a voice coming from another all-girls group. “Take care, Ash!” It was Lady Maika, who today was not nervous at all.

I felt blessed to hear her cheerful voice greet me. “Thanks, Maika! You too!” I waved my hand and started walking.

The other two boys had an even more sullen look on their faces now. They probably feared all the good spots would get taken up quickly. *Yes, I’ll hurry. Don’t be so grumpy.*

At the place I had pointed out, there were a lot of edible plants growing this year as well. While paying attention to the other boys, I started collecting.

I felt slightly bad for my family, but after a short while, I stopped gathering and started looking for some of the plants that were listed in the botanical guide. I thought I had previously seen some of the ones which I considered useful in this area. I was not particularly good at remembering plants, but I had a feeling I had seen something like this one in my past life.

There was a fallen tree ahead which had collapsed into a rock, with its tip pointing upwards. I did not lose any time climbing it up to have a look at my surroundings, and as planned, the area was filled with splendid, tall-grown

trees.

And then, I found it. Unlike most of the trees, which had grown vertically, this specimen was expanding horizontally. Halfway, the trunk branched out at random directions, which gave it a wide look. However, the most peculiar thing was its leaves. They looked hard, serrated, and absurdly thick. I had thought I had seen it somewhere before, and I was convinced of it once I checked its use in the botanical guide.

This was a type of aloe tree. It was good against cuts, burns, stings, all sorts of internal disorders, and it was good for your skin too. On top of that, it also tasted nice—it was truly a useful plant. In my past life, most aloe plants were just made up of leaves, like small bushes, so it took me a while to realize their common points, since in this world aloe was found in the form of splendid trees. Thinking about it now, I seemed to remember having heard about aloe trees before.

I was not sure how to properly use it yet, but I was prepared to find out through experimenting little by little. Still, even just using the liquid coming from its leaves directly was likely more effective than any medicine we bought from Quid. This was a huge first discovery. I would have been so happy if there was another book about aloe plants in Father Folke's library, but I doubted it.

I was already counting my chickens before they had hatched when... I suddenly passed out.

So this was it—my first accident...

I did not know what to do. I was on my own in a forest with no recollection of what I was doing. My head hurt horribly—this was probably the reason why I could not remember anything. The only thing I remembered was going into the woods in the morning to gather wild edible plants, but that was it.

I had probably woken up a while earlier. I had a vague memory of absentmindedly wandering about the forest with my consciousness scattered, even though I was well aware of the ironclad rule to not move around in case of an accident. I would have kicked myself, but in my dizzy state of mind, I had probably not been capable of thinking straight.

Now, I was deep inside the thick of the forest. When I touched my head—extremely in pain—I got some nearly-dried blood on my hands. While this must have been the reason for my passing out and losing my memories, I had no idea why or how I had hit my head.

First and foremost, I had to rack my brain in order to survive this situation.

“It looks like I can think straight enough again to deal with reality.”

Once I spoke these words out loud, it became clear to me that I needed to survive. I still wanted to read so many books. I also wanted to help Father Folke decipher the ancient language. And I had only started to teach Lady Maika how to read and write. Thanks to my books, I had more than enough reasons to go on living—I was not scared of dying. *I mean, I already died once.* But I wanted to do anything in my power to keep on living.

“I need to find out where I am first. North seems to be that way, so the village should be that way,” I concluded from the position of the sun and the moss growth on the trees in the area. In my past life, I would not have been able to do this, but living in this world for nine years had taught me a thing or two.

“It looks like the sun is about to set. I should probably give up for today and get ready for the night,” I decided.

I reaffirmed my possessions. Luckily, the book was still there. Excellent. I also had the knife and the basket that I had used for gathering the edible plants. However, it looked like I had dropped the plants themselves somewhere. The flint and the tinder which I always brought just in case going out gathering were in the inside pocket of my jacket.

“I thought something like this might happen, so I came prepared!” I had never thought that one day I would say that line.

I shivered thinking how important it was to be prepared. It looked like it was somehow going to be alright.

“First, I need to light a fire before sunset. And ideally, I also need to find a source of water.”

I walked northwards while picking up the thing that I needed: A stick which acted doubly as a cane to reduce my fatigue from walking and a weapon of self-

defense, as well as branches and leaves that looked like they were going to burn easily. I also picked up some edible plants, but since I no longer remembered whether it was bracken or royal fern which you could not eat raw, I had to rely on parsley to fill up my stomach. I probably was going to stay quite hungry.

More importantly, I had to find drinking water. Thirst was much more likely to hinder my actions than famine. My throat was already drying out. A spring in the woods was probably clean, but I was only prepared to drink directly from a clear source. Otherwise, there was a high chance of contracting a disease or a parasite, considering all the other animals that surely drank the same water. It would have been fine if I had been able to boil the water, but I did not carry around a pot.

Suddenly, I heard the sound of water. I hoped it was drinking water. Embracing my fleeting hope, I walked towards the sound... only to be disappointed.

I arrived at a small river. As it had not rained, it looked clear, but that did not mean it was safe to drink—after all, bacteria were invisible to the eye. It was still useful for other things, such as cooking or washing, though. And if worse came to worst, I had the option of trying my luck.

I decided to put up camp for the night next to the river. I felt much lighter after unloading the bonfire equipment and the edible plants. Although it nearly broke my heart, I also let go of the book temporarily—I needed to collect more wood if I wanted my fire to last throughout the night. The scarlet sun was warning me that there was not much time left.

As I did this, I came across an aloe tree. I remembered also finding this tree before passing out. This seemed like a good opportunity to test its healing properties on my head wound.

The fire started without any problems inside the pseudo-stove which I had made of stones from the river. Without the flint and the tinder, I most likely would have been shivering in the darkness of the night. I was not really confident that I could have lit a fire through mere friction; that was one of the reasons why I had come prepared. I was glad I had some light and a bit of

warmth. Considering the memories from my past life, mentally I was already an adult, but even so, a forest after the sunset was a very scary place. This must have been instinctive.

I enclosed some aloe inside a cloth—which I had originally brought to wipe off my sweat—and wrapped it around my head to cover my wound. You were supposed to grate the aloe, but that was impossible without any containers. I felt the heat disappearing from my wound, but surely that was just a placebo effect. I had to experiment a bit more to find out how effective it truly was.

However, I had discovered something else. While the surface of the aloe was bitter, I tried the jelly-like substance on the inside and it turned out to be quite delicious for a raw vegetable. Was it a vegetable or a fruit? I was not sure, but either way, I cut off some more jelly with my knife, as its high moisture content also helped to quench my thirst.

I also ate some parsley after washing it in the river and lightly roasting it over the fire to make sure it would not be covered in insects. Moreover, I hoped to gain a tiny bit of liquid from the heated water sticking on the parsley.

Maybe it was because I had managed to eat a little, but I felt slightly relieved.

Finally, I wanted to get some protein. If only there were some snakes around, I would have chopped their heads off, drunk their fresh blood, and eaten their roasted flesh. That way, I would have taken care of my thirst and hunger all at once.

As I indulged in my fantasies, I slowly dozed off. I ended up dreaming about having a full-course snake dinner.

Maika's Perspective

My heart froze when I noticed that Ash was gone.

At first, I had heard someone shouting that a wild boar had appeared. That was scary, but it was also something that the adults had warned us about countless times. One of the older girls, who was the foraging leader, had reminded us to stay calm and ordered everyone to gather slowly and quietly at the entrance of the forest. There had been a few children who made some

noise, but fortunately the wild boar had not been running wild, and so no one got hurt.

After everyone had gathered, they all looked relieved. However, soon they realized that someone was missing. Although I might have been the first to notice it, I couldn't bring myself to say anything.

"Where is Ash?" our leader asked. Everyone stared at Ash's group partner, Jigil, who had a pale look on his face. "What happened, Jigil?"

"The boar appeared next to Ash and then..." Jigil couldn't bring himself to say anything more, but that was all he needed to say.

"Everyone, go back to the village! And Maika, could you tell your father... Maika, are you okay?"

I know. I have to tell my parents.

My dad was a master swordsman—my mom was always boasting about how he was the best in the kingdom.

My dad was going to save Ash.

If he could find him. If it wasn't already too late.

If Ash hadn't already...

Before I knew it, I was crying. I was embarrassed, but I couldn't stop. *No! I don't want to think about it. Ash can't die yet.*

"Everything is going to be alright, Maika. We're talking about Ash after all; I am sure he knows how to deal with a wild boar." While I was crying my eyes out, my mom had rushed towards the forest and embraced me. She desperately tried to comfort me, but I couldn't stop worrying.

All the adults looked concerned themselves. They were saying that Ash had been taken away by a boar, and how unfortunate it was that Ban, the hunter, wasn't around at a time like this. Even my mom wasn't smiling in the slightest. I was getting more and more scared; I was shivering. I couldn't stop crying.

In that moment, Folke, who unusually had come out of the church, approached me. "Hey there. Don't waste your tears so easily." He was speaking in a calm voice.

How can he be so composed? And it doesn't look like he is faking it, like my mom and all the others either; he seems genuinely unconcerned. I blankly looked up at him.

"At this rate, you won't have any tears left for when he comes back," he said.

"He will come back?"

"Of course he will."

How? Didn't the boar ki—

"As if a mere boar could harm that demon-like Ash! That boy could talk even Death itself into signing an unreasonable contract and come back unscathed." Folke sneered at the dangerous boar, considering it much weaker than Ash.

He cleared his throat and continued in a serious tone, saying, "Let me tell you a story, Maika." Folke leaned in to stealthily tell me a secret that had been passed down for generations. "There is a legend about a bird god who was alive a long, long time ago. He was different from the gods whom we worship today at the church; this god did not die. He was known as the Phoenix. Whenever he got injured, or when he grew to be of old age, he prepared himself a nest out of cinnamon twigs, sat down in the nest, and lit it up with a magical flame to burn himself alive."

"But wouldn't he die?"

"Yeah, normally this would have killed him. But the Phoenix was not normal. After the magical flames had burnt out, he revived and rose from the ashes mightier than before."

From the Ashes? Ash?

"Don't you think that gives the name 'Ash' a quite powerful meaning? Although I guess only researchers of ancient writings would really know the origin behind it." Folke was smiling. "So, you should save your tears for when Ash comes back," Folke added while wiping off my tears. "Tears are a woman's best weapon after all; don't hold back when you use them on Ash. Otherwise, that blockhead will just act as if nothing happened." Folke, who had just comforted me, looked like a true priest with a gentle smile on his face.



The next morning, I woke up at the first signs of the sun, as I had not been able to get any sound sleep. In the night, I had woken up several times, each time checking on my wounds and throwing more branches into the bonfire to keep it going. I just could not get rid of my extreme fatigue. I decided to stay and rest here for a little while longer. Since I could not think straight, I was not sure whether this was a rational decision or a lazy one, but I prayed it was the former.

I needed protein. I thought of the extremely delicious snake I had eaten in my dream. I was also thirsty. For now, I was just going to gather some more of what I assumed to be aloe (although I was almost certain that it was indeed aloe after tasting it the night before).

After heating it up over the bonfire and eating it, I came to the realization that I needed proper drinking water. The fluid from the aloe may have been enough to quench my thirst while I was idle, but I needed to increase my intake once I was going to move around the forest. Besides, I risked harming my body if I consumed too much aloe, considering it was a plant used to treat wounds and the skin.

I remembered that there were plants that had large amounts of water stored inside them. For example, in the desert it was possible to use the water inside cacti to rehydrate yourself. I wondered if there was a similar plant in this forest.

I reached out for my beloved book in the hope of salvation when it struck me—I could have made a pot out of the book. And I did not mean it as a joke—I was dead serious. I recalled hearing about something called paper hotpots in my past life. Even though it was made of paper, it was durable enough to put it on open fire and let the water or soup inside simmer until it was hot. The paper itself did not even need to be specially prepared; it just somehow worked.

Of course, I did not intend to use my precious book. If it was possible to make a hotpot out of paper, surely it would have also worked with leaves, which were less flammable. What a logical guess! I was ready to start my little experiment right away. In the forest, there were also many more leaves available than pages in my book too.

I decided to use a plant that looked like broad-leaf bamboo. If it was the same in this world, that meant it was not poisonous, and it even had an antibacterial effect. If it turned out to be a different type of plant, I prayed that at the very least it was not going to poison me.

Maybe it was because I had exhausted mind and body in the span of one night, but I felt that my safety standards became increasingly lax. I was pushing my nine-year-old body to its limits. I was resolved to replenish myself as best as possible before the situation became fatal.

It took some effort to create a vessel large enough to hold a gulp of water, as the bamboo leaves themselves were not very big. Considering that the first gulp was also a poison tasting at the same time, this might have actually been for the best. I was going to worry about the size of the vessel once my experiment was a success.

I suspended the bamboo pot from branches that I had set up on top of the stove and started a fire—so far so good. I was feeling warm and fuzzy inside thinking about how I had come up with this idea, and how I had been able to put my nine years of experience in this world to good practice. However, it was nowhere near as warm as the inside of the bamboo pot—it was boiling. While it had been my own idea, it was a strange sight.

After letting the water boil for a little while longer, I let it cool off away from the fire before cautiously starting to drink. At first, I tasted it inside my mouth and looked out for any possible signs of danger. While I was not trained in poison tasting, I considered the lack of any symptoms such as numbness a good enough sign to swallow the water.

It felt like I had come back to life. It seemed like the fluids contained in the aloe and parsley had not been nearly enough after all. I waited for a little while longer to see if there were any side effects before I prepared several more bamboo pots. I could not wait to drink to my heart's content.

As I suspended as many pots as possible over the stove, I wondered what I should do in the meantime. I mostly thought about food, as you might have expected from someone who had not eaten a proper meal in a while. Looking around with an empty stomach, I noticed the fish in the river. Why had I not

thought about this before? I could have fried and eaten the fish. That would have also been safer than eating wild plants. I just needed to figure out how to catch them.

Since I had the basket for gathering plants with me, I figured that I could recreate the fishing method used in the village. It was quite easy, actually. First, I had to set up the basket at a narrow place in the river. If I couldn't find such a place, I could narrow the flow by placing some stones and branches. Next, I needed to make some noise upstream by splashing the water before chasing the fish all the way down to the basket. It was harder than usual given that I could not corner them as well on my own, and that the basket was quite small, but even so, I managed to catch two fish. *Hello, protein. We will become one in body and soul.* Like a child, I jumped full of joy. I made a skewer out of some twigs and started frying the fish immediately.

The sun had reached its zenith. This meant that it had already been some time since my experiment with the water, and I was still feeling fine. At least I knew that I could avoid starving or dehydrating to death. I felt a bit relieved. For the rest of the day, I was going to focus on getting a hold of food and water, so that tomorrow I could start my journey back to the village.

I was smiling at the sight of the cooked fish, lost in my thoughts, when suddenly a hand grabbed my shoulder from behind...

“Do not scare me like that!”

I looked at the man who had sneaked up on me and almost made me throw my fish skewer to his face. I had never talked to him before, but I knew who this tough-looking guy in his late twenties was.

“What a coincidence to see you here, Ban!” I was talking to Ban, the hunter.

His lips were tightly closed, and he had a sharp look on his face. He sat down in front of me without saying a word. *Come on, say something.*

“Do you want to eat one?” I asked.

I tried making conversation, but I was only met with silence followed by a head shake. Since Ban was so silent and unsociable, most children thought of

him as a scary person. It was also no surprise that he was still celibate even though he was good-looking.

“What happened?” Hearing a deep voice, I instinctively looked around my surroundings. It took me a moment to realize that this was Ban’s voice. It turned out I had not just never talked to him personally, but I also had never heard him speak to anyone else before. In the meantime, Ban was scratching his head, probably wondering why I did not respond to him.

“Oh, I am sorry. You are right, it is strange that I am out here all by myself.”

Ban nodded in agreement.

“To put it simply, I had an accident and I am utterly lost. Could you help me find my way back to the village?”

After blinking his sharp eyes several times, he nodded again.

Finally, it looked like I was going to make it back home. As a hunter, Ban was one of the only forest experts around here. The other villagers only entered the outskirts when foraging, but he set foot into the depths of the woods.

Relieved, I nibbled on my cooked fish. I was not going to leave my prepared food just because I knew I could go home now.

While chewing, I talked to the quiet Ban. “You really saved me. Yesterday, I was gathering wild edible plants with everyone, but in order to find the aloe tree, I decided to climb up a fallen tree by myself, and after that, I do not remember anything. Apparently, I passed out, and when I woke up again I found myself in the middle of the forest, not knowing where I was.”

Ban was once again scratching his head upon hearing the word ‘aloe.’

“Are you confused by the word ‘aloe’?”

He nodded to answer my question.

“Aloe is this here.” I showed him the leftovers from this morning’s breakfast.

“Ointment,” he murmured with a satisfied look on his face.

“Oh?” *Wait a minute. You know this can be used as an ointment?* “Did you know about this plant?”

The hunter nodded.

Wow. I wonder why he didn't tell the villagers about such a useful plant. Especially considering it grows in the outskirts as well.

"Could I ask you how you know about it? No one else seems to be aware of it."

"The teachings."

That seemed to be his whole explanation. Maybe he was cursed and bound to die if he kept on speaking for too long.

"Of the hunters." He continued his explanation with a considerable delay after seeing my puzzled expression.

"The teachings of the hunters? You mean the knowledge that has been passed down from previous generations of hunters?"

Once again, he signaled his agreement with a nod.

I wondered why he seemed so satisfied, but I understood what he was trying to say. Although we may have been foraging edible plants, we were still farmers; our expertise lay in the fields and not the forest or the mountains. Hunters, on the other hand, were experts in the latter two. Spending most of their daily lives in the forest, it was only natural that they had full knowledge of it, unlike the farmers who barely ever set foot inside. I would have liked them to share this knowledge more widely, but I guess that was how things were...

"Could it be that you know more of the plants that are listed in this book?"

Ban tilted his head. While his expression always stayed the same, it seemed that he moved his head a lot. I was starting to enjoy this partially-silent conversation.

"I thought that if I could find more plants that can be used as food or medicine, life in the village would be easier. As a first step, I discovered this aloe."

Ban nodded.

"If you don't mind, could you please take a look at the plants in this book? And if there is anything that you recognize, could you show me where it

grows?”

I swiftly sat down next to him and opened the botanical guide. His sharp gaze, which would have terrified most children, wandered towards the book. As I flipped through the pages, he pointed out all the plants he recognized. There were many more than I would have expected.

“Oh, that is incredible! You are amazing, Ban!”

It went without saying that books were incredible, but so was experience cultivated from actual practice. Both were outstanding accomplishments of the human intellect! There were so many different species of plants that I wondered why none of them had been in common usage until now. Of course, there would also be cases where it may have been more difficult to obtain them in practice, but even so, it felt like there were a lot of wasted resources.

“By the way, could I ask you for a favor?” I threw the leftover fish bones into the fire and politely bowed my head. “Before going back home, I would love to collect some of the plants that you recognized. If it is not a problem for you, could you please show me where they are?”

I did not want to waste the chance of having an expert of the forest share his superior knowledge with me on the way back. Not to mention that it would have been much faster and safer than doing it on my own. It was a reasonable proposal—attempting to turn my misfortune into a streak of luck.

However, Ban looked slightly annoyed.

Come on, don't say no. Are you really going to turn down the heartfelt request of a cute, innocent child like me?

I was not going to force him, and I was aware that it was still only a day after my accident, but I did not see the harm of collecting the ones that were on our way back anyway. That would have been good enough for me, and I was almost sure that the villagers were going to be happy too.

After giving him a desperate plea, Ban agreed to take me back to the village on the next day while looking after the traps he had set up and, of course, showing me all the wild herbs along the way. He did not want to be negligent in his duties as a hunter, so it seemed that this was a good arrangement for him

too. Learning that piece of information from the silent Ban, I regretted sounding so desperate in my request, but this time I chose to remain silent.

On the second day after my accident, Ban showed me wild herbs that I did not recollect ever having seen in my past life.

Now I understood why the farmers were not aware of them. For some, it took a lot of time and effort to get them, and others looked almost identical to poisonous herbs or became poisonous after a certain amount. Ban taught me that even hunters, who were familiar with seeing these herbs every day, often only relied on them in emergencies, and that it was better to leave it be if one was unsure. There were also some exceptional herbs that were not poisonous at all and tasted nice. However, none of them were in the outskirts of the forest, and thus were difficult to reach.

According to Ban, there was also a danger of demons in the forest. I was still not entirely convinced on that matter. Did demons really exist in this world?

Anyway, after spending a night together, I learned that silent Ban was quite good at looking out for others and taking care of them. He walked at my pace and showed me how to take apart the squirrel he had caught in one of his traps. We ended up eating the squirrel together with some wild herbs that I did not know. *I have to admit that the dissection of the squirrel was quite grotesque, though.*

Altogether, it had been an extremely worthwhile experience. I had been able to eat mea—to put the knowledge from my book into practical use. I wondered if it was possible to help Ban with his work from time to time, considering how delicious the mea—how beneficial it had been to my research of wild plants.

Lost in my thoughts, I suddenly realized we were passing a familiar spot. I recognized the aloe tree and the fallen tree. We found ourselves in the foraging area. The village must have been near.

“I see. This is how it was all connected. Over there is the aloe tree that I discovered before passing out!” I pointed towards it.

Ban nodded and looked at the fallen tree.

“Ah, yes. This is the fallen tree that I climbed to get a better look at the aloe tree.”

The village was almost within reach. First, I wanted to go back to my house and get some good sleep. I had learned that camping outside was not very refreshing. My nine-year-old body was at its limits, and even now I had to push myself in order not to fall asleep on the spot.

“Almost there.” Ban seemed to notice my fatigue and kept looking behind to see if I was alright. He may have been silent and unsociable, but he was very caring. I was bowing my head in gratitude while on the inside I was grumbling and complaining. *Woe is me!*

Finally, we arrived at the village and I shakily approached the public square, where a large crowd was gathering. We both looked at each other, not really understanding what was happening.

Sure, it was a small village, but usually it was also quiet, since everyone was busy with their daily lives. The people only gathered in a large crowd like this on occasions such as the spring festival, the harvest festival, or the fertility prayer festival. And whenever someone got married or someone had died. Given that the spring festival had already happened recently, it could not have been that. It was also unlikely that someone would have suddenly gotten married without there being any rumors in such a small village. So most likely, someone had suddenly passed away. Unfortunately, this happened often. I wondered who it was. The elder Madel had not been too well recently, but in this life, it was also common that younger people died from a sudden illness.

“What happened here?” I walked towards the villagers, who all looked gloomy.

At that moment, everyone looked at us in shock. Ban and I both scratched our heads at this unexpected reaction. No one really knew what to do or say.

The first ones to break this silence were Lady Maika and my mother. Both called out my name and came to embrace me. *Wait.*



My legs were trembling from walking all over the forest. It was hard to keep my balance, having not just one but two people throw themselves at me at the same time. Still, I somehow managed to resist. ...For a few seconds at least. In the end, I fell over as expected. I was only a nine-year-old boy after all. It did not help that Lady Maika was already more physically developed than me.

I did not know what to do when both women continued to cry and hug me after I was on the ground. *Someone please explain to me what happened!*

At that moment, I saw Father Folke walking towards me with the prayer book for ceremonies in his hand.

"I knew you'd make it back." Father Folke seemed to be in a good mood as he tapped me on the shoulder with his book.

"What do you mean by that? What exactly is happening here?"

"Ah, yeah, I probably should explain. We were about to hold your funeral."

"What?!" *Don't pronounce me dead this easily!* It had only been half a year since I had started enjoying life in this world. My life had only just begun! "Why would I be dead? Sure, I had a little accident, and I understand that you were worried, but it has only been three days!"

"Haha, you're right! It was only a little accident and only three days!" Father Folke started laughing in a loud voice. *I'm glad you are enjoying yourself.*

"What a fuss." Ban was rolling his eyes.

While most villagers seemed surprised upon hearing him speak, they all nodded and agreed with the sentiment. What a fuss, indeed.

Spending a night in the severely cold snow-covered mountain would surely have been fatal, but I had been inside a fairly warm forest in spring. Staying still, I probably could have survived for up to a week.

However, Lady Maika, who was still clinging to my neck, scowled at me with her red eyes. "Stupid Ash! How can you be so calm?"

Did I look calm right now? If anything, I thought that I would have looked confused. Either way, I did not want to talk back to a crying girl, so I just smiled awkwardly, which only made her cry even more.

“Y-You were attacked by a b-boar... B-But y-you are fine... I’m so happy you are back!”

I did not have any memories of passing out, but it seemed like I had gone missing after being attacked by a wild boar, so it was not just an accident. In that case, I could see why they would have held a funeral. Boars mostly eat plants, but they are actually omnivorous.

“Well, I am deeply sorry for making you worry about me.” While I intended it as a heartfelt, sincere apology, Lady Maika and my mother suddenly got angry. They were scolding me for staying calm and acting as if nothing had happened.

In contrast, Father Folke was holding his stomach in laughter. “Hahaha! I knew you wouldn’t die so easily! I am not sure there is anything that could kill you, haha!”

What did that priest think I was? Just like any human, I would have died if I had been killed. As a matter of fact, I had died in my past life.

It looked like I was highly sought after, but I just wanted to go to bed and sleep. I also needed to find out how much I could use the aloe leaves that I had collected. To do so, I probably needed a pen and paper to write down my research notes. I could not wait for the peddler Quid’s next visit so I could rip him o—have him sell it to me for a cheap price.

Maika’s Perspective

It had been three days since Ash had gone missing. Everyone else in the village had given up on him; they were already preparing his funeral. The girls who had always been talking about him were crying. Even the boys who didn’t like him had tears in their eyes. Since Ash was so special, it was only natural that everyone would have been sad once he was gone. Of course, I was also about to cry. I had only recently discovered that I liked him, and I had planned to get him to like me too, but now this had happened.

I could not believe it. I did not want to believe it, so instead I believed that he was still alive, as Folke had said. That’s right—I did not have to cry. I tried my best to save all my tears for when he was going to come back. I was just a little

bit worried that, if I held them back too much, I would end up drowning him in my tears.

Folke, who had comforted me, was standing in his ceremonial dress in the public square, grumbling to the other adults. “Do you really want to do this? I don’t mind holding a funeral, I’m just saying that it’s still possible he comes back the moment we finish the ceremony.” I was glad to see that he still believed in Ash, just like he had told me. “I will do it, but I just think that it is pointless.”

The other adults stared at Folke, who reluctantly opened his book. It was the same book that Ash and I had studied together.

“So... uhm... Just in case, let us hold the funeral. Silence, please!”

They are about to start, Ash.

The square was eerily silent considering the whole village was gathered. You could only hear some people sob.

...Or so I thought.

“What happened here?”

His voice sounded so normal. Maybe it was a little lower than usual, but it did not sound like the voice of someone who was about to be buried. Not that they would have made any sound.

Everyone turned to look in the direction of the voice—they were all speechless. As they had expected, or maybe contrary to their expectations, the voice belonged to Ash. It really was him. And he looked the same as three days ago.

I had believed in him, but there had still been a tiny bit of doubt left in my heart. I instinctively turned my head towards Folke, who had believed in Ash with even more certainty. He turned away his face and discreetly wiped his eyes. Ah, it looked like he had also believed in Ash. He had not *known* that Ash was going to make it back alive, but he had desperately *believed* it.

After Folke finished wiping, our eyes met and he grimaced. At first, I thought that he must have been embarrassed, but it turned out that he was pointing me in the direction of Ash with his grimace. He was asking me to go towards him. I

immediately understood and remembered what he had told me three days ago. I had to run towards Ash! Before I knew it, my body was already moving.

I had held back this whole time. My body had done its best! My eyes started flooding with tears. My voice was embarrassingly loud. I pushed aside the crowd and jumped towards Ash at the same time as Mrs. Sheba. I was a little bit disappointed that I could not have Ash for myself, but it was also amazing that I got to him at the same time as his mom.

We both did not hold back in attacking him with our tears. It looked like Folke was right when he said that tears were a woman's best weapon. Hehe, I had never seen Ash this flustered before.



After a short while, the peddler Quid had come, so I lost no time in paying him a visit to negotiate.

“Do you have a moment? There is something I want to consult with you about.”

“Oh, if it isn't Ash. What could it be?”

I had not interacted with him at all since last time, but his reaction was stiff. Did he think I was going to threaten him with the incident from last time? *Rest assured... and scared; I'm not going to do anything that goes against my conscience.*

“I have come across this plant. Do you know what this is?”

When I showed the aloe leaf to Mr. Quid, he shook his head. It didn't look like he knew what it was. I had thought that maybe it was possible to get a hold of it in the city, considering that it was a robust plant, and that there were so many different types, but it looked like it was not known around there.

“What is this? It is drooping a bit, and it looks kind of gross...”

“It is a leaf of a plant.”

“A leaf? Are you sure it's not a stalk?”

Considering how thick it was, it looked indeed more like a stalk or a stem than a leaf. It certainly was a strange plant.

“According to a book I have read, this plant can be used as medicine,” I explained.

“Oh... Well, it looks strange, so I suppose it is not too surprising that it would have some kind of healing effect.”

That was quite an arbitrary and dangerous standard. Yet another reason not to trust Quid’s medicine. I remembered that in my past life, there were quite a few cultural spheres that believed the lethally poisonous mercury to be a secret medicine. There were even some people who considered the feces and urine of animals—including humans—to have healing effects, or even parts of dead bodies.

“So, I have been thinking about making some medicine myself, but first I need to conduct some experiments to see how well they work and if there are no problems.”

“Why? Didn’t you already read about it in a book?”

Unfortunately, people here were quick to believe anything someone supposedly important and knowledgeable had said before them.

“Yes, but it is still possible that there are going to be side effects if you use it too much. Or that it will not work at all depending on the method you use.”

“That seems like a hassle.”

“Do you not observe and collect information before engaging with any new customers?” This comparison seemed to convince him. “I am glad you understand. Anyway, in order to conduct my experiment, I need pen and paper.”

“Ah, I see where this is going.” Mr. Quid smiled nervously. He seemed a little relieved to know what threat was incoming. Knowing something was always better than nothing, even if the outcome was bad. “But don’t you need ink as well?”

“Ah, yes, I do.”

“Hmm...” He seemed conflicted.

It seemed that they were expensive goods after all, and he did not want to

give them away for free. Although I had some damaging information on him, I did not necessarily want to corner him to a point where he was no longer willing to return; that would have been a detriment to both of us.

“For now, I would only need a little bit. If I could, I would of course pay for the goods... But alas, I do not have any money to my name yet.”

“I would have been surprised if you did. Although maybe not that much.”

What are you implying about an innocent child like me? “If the development of the medicine succeeds, I will give some to you as well. You may even be able to sell it in the city too.” I intended to pay him back after achieving success. For now, I was going to put it on a tab. *I swear I’ll try my best, so please forgive me in case I end up bailing on the payment.*

“Hmm...” He was only groaning and not agreeing with me at all.

It seemed like I was out of luck. While Mr. Quid may not have understood scientific research methods, as a peddler he was still a realist. On top of that, he was a small-business owner who did not readily jump on any new get-rich-quick schemes that came along. I braced myself to trick my father and extort some money from him.

As both Quid and I were lost in thought, Ban approached us.

“Oh, hello there, Ban!”

As usual, silent Ban only replied with a nod.

It looked like he had come to buy some necessities in exchange for smoked meats and pelts, which he had obtained from a hunt. He pointed out the goods he needed, and Mr. Quid started calculating. Previously, he had overcharged Ban, but considering I was here today, I did not expect anything fishy to happen.

After finishing his groceries, Ban looked at me and scratched his head.

“What’s wrong?”

“I just need some pen and paper, so I am checking out how much it would cost.”

He seemed convinced.

At the same time, Mr. Quid had a look of surprise on his face when he heard

Ban's voice. Just how little did this man speak? And how had he been able to buy groceries without any issues up until now?

"How much?" Ban asked.

"Yeah. Mr. Quid, how much was it in the end?" I joined Ban in asking the price.

"Let's see... Considering it's a request from Ash... and if you're fine with a slightly damaged paper... How about 15 iron for one set? Or let's say 13... No, I can go down to 12."

Twelve iron coins. He was probably losing money with that price, but to me it was far out of reach. It was the same price as an essential such as salt.

"I'll pay." I did not believe what I had just heard Ban say.

"No, I cannot let you pay for something this expensive. I am still in debt to you for saving my life!" I would have loved to just say thank you and take him up on his offer, but I was not shameless enough to just forget my debt.

Ban just shook his head in silence towards me and then nodded with his sharp look in Mr. Quid's direction.

"Are you sure about this, Ban? As long as you're fine with it, I don't mind." Mr. Quid looked quite surprised, but then Ban confirmed the purchase with another nod, before walking off with his own groceries. What a guy.

"What an incredibly cool person."

"Yes, very cool."

However, he had forgotten his change.

I decided to bring it to him on a later date, together with a token of gratitude for the pen and paper.

Chapter 3: Following the Word of the Page

The summer was getting hotter day by day.

Although the seasons changed, my daily life stayed the same. I worked in the fields, gathered edible plants on the outskirts of the forest, went to the church to borrow books, and helped Lady Maika study. However, one new activity had been added since spring: I started helping Ban in exchange for wild herbs, which he picked up on his hunts.

Basically, I did maintenance for his hunting tools, such as his spears and traps, and helped him dissect and process his prey. I had to admit, though, that until recently I was probably slowing him down more than anything, as he had to teach me how to properly do his work. However, as a result, I now had some basic knowledge of hunting.

He had promised to take me to the mountains sometime in the future. I could not wait to join him and collect wild herbs myself. Since Ban was first and foremost a hunter, he could never bring back too many herbs, but I was sure that was going to change once I tagged along. In summer, there were also supposed to be some very delicious and filling plants, so I was also looking forward to expanding my dinner menu.

And there was one more thing that had changed: I had started looking after a mouse. After some deliberation, I had settled for the name Guinea Pig. And as the name suggested, it was not a pet; I was currently experimenting with the healing effects of aloe on it. I was planning to test other medicine on the little mouse too—he did not have any right to veto.

As someone with past-life memories, intentionally hurting a mouse which I had caught and forcing it to drink a dangerous amount of aloe seemed quite... reasonable. However, for us mice were enemies—they were not weak and pitiful, but rather cunning and formidable foes. They were an odious bunch who did not deserve any mercy.

In my past life, I probably would not have hated them this much, but in this

world where we were fighting with hunger daily, mice who ate up the crops in the fields and in the warehouse were mere pests, and eliminated on sight. I did not think it was necessary to torture them in the process of extermination, but I did slightly enjoy using them as guinea pigs for my necessary experiments. When it came to hunger, humans tended to become narrow-minded.

Thanks to my odious Guinea Pig, I had learned a great deal about aloe. It depended on the proper dose, but it seemed to alleviate—or at the very least prevent—festerings on all kinds of ailments of the skin, ranging from open wounds to burns and bug bites. Taking it orally seemed to help with stomach aches and constipation.

After experimenting on the guinea pig, I also started experimenting on myself by rubbing the ointment on my right hand, which in turn had become smooth like a baby's skin. Well, not quite, but all the cracks and hangnails on my hand, which had been quite rough from working day and night, had disappeared, and it had become much smoother. So much so, that my left hand looked shriveled in comparison.

That effect alone would have been enough to sell it as medicine, especially to women. My own mother enthusiastically volunteered as a second human test subject. It seemed that it had made her kitchen work more comfortable, and it warmed my heart to see her smile.

I was going to talk to Mr. Quid and tentatively hoped to have him sell it in the city once I managed to finalize the ointment. I needed to conduct more clinical trials, but as a farmer, I was limited in my resources. In that regard, I also wanted to consult with the peddler and cautiously select my customers. If I managed to gain some money, farming work was sure to become easier too. We could buy farming tools, horses, and cows... or maybe even something better.

I needed to inform myself before making any purchases, though, and the best way to do that was to gain more knowledge by reading more books.

"That looks like a difficult book again. What are you reading this time?" As I was reading in the church, Lady Maika started talking to me with a smile on her face.

By now, she was used to coming here alone, and she was no longer nervous. She sat down next to me and looked at my book.

“Live...stock... ma...nu...al... A livestock manual?”

“Correct. Well done.”

It was still a bit clumsy at times, but her reading had become quite good. If she continued like this, soon she was going to be able to read at the same speed that she talked. At the moment, she was focusing on learning how to write, though. She looked a bit bashful, but happy that she was able to read the words.

“But why livestock? That means animals like horses and cows, right?”

“Yes, any animal that can be domesticated. Chickens too.”

“So, basically meat?”

“Yes, meat.” I agreed with Lady Maika, who was correct on all accounts. As a child, this may have been the only correct perception. “If my aloe ointment is a success, I will make some money. I do not know how much I can make, but if possible, I want to start something new in this village.”

“And that would be livestock?”

“That was one idea. However, it looks like raising animals is quite expensive, so I would need to make a lot of money first.”

It also required a lot of specific knowledge and manpower. It would have been necessary to employ someone with that knowledge. That person and the animals would have also needed shelter in the village, and of course, we also would have needed to buy some animals first. It did not seem very realistic to expect the profits from the aloe ointment to pay for all of that.

The farming horse that had died two years ago had been the last survivor of a group of horses gifted to help develop this village in its early stages. They had been a cheap initial investment, and it had been understood from the beginning that they were not supposed to hold out for too long, eventually destined for slaughter.

At the early stages of development, short-term solutions to overcome the

obstacles in front of your eyes may have been appropriate, but now it was necessary to think of long-term solutions. In that regard, livestock—which had a fairly short life span—was not the best investment. It was more cost-effective to buy new farm tools made of iron. Chickens would have been easier to raise, but seeing that there were no walls surrounding this village, there was a real danger of the livestock dying to wolves or maybe even demons.

According to my research, demons were clearly distinct from wolves or other similar harmful beasts. I really wondered what those demons were...

I told Lady Maika some of my more practical thoughts. Even though she was still young, she happily listened to my presumably quite boring ramblings. She was a good person; no doubt she was going to have a wonderful family someday.

“That’s amazing! You are really something, Ash.”

“Do not flatter me yet; I still have not done anything.”

“That’s not true. Your medicine is already amazing. My parents thought so too. Look!” She held out both her hands in front of me.

“Oh, let me see.” Reluctantly, I drew her hands towards me, looked at their front and back, and traced them with my fingers.

It was no sexual harassment; I merely observed the results of my experiment. Lady Maika had been test subject number three. She had noticed the difference between my right and left hand when I was using the ointment on myself. Once I had told her the reason, she had been eager to try it herself. After all, she was still a woman, albeit a young one. After the experiment on myself had ended, I had both her and my mother use the ointment.

“It looks good. I cannot see any rashes or red swellings. How do you feel? Does it hurt or itch anywhere?”

She did not reply when I started my pseudo-examination after touching her skin. I realized what had happened when I saw her staring at my hand holding hers, with a nervous look on her bright-red face.

“I am sorry, I should have held back. I did not mean to be rude towards a lady.”

Even though she was a child, I should have taken into consideration that she was still a girl. In my defense, I had wanted to make sure that there were no bad side effects from my experiment.

“N-N-No. It’s c-completely f-f-fine.”

She was so kind. However, I needed to make an effort to treat her like a lady from now on. I wanted to become a better person than in my past life, and my goal was to become a perfect gentleman in this world. I did not think I could have ever fully grasped a woman’s heart, but I was going to try my best.

Still blushing, Lady Maika continued, “And there have been none of the side effects that you mentioned at the start; my skin has just become really smooth.”

“I am glad to hear that.”

No matter the world, women’s awareness of beauty and cosmetics seemed to stay the same. This was destined to be a success once I started selling it.

“Also, my mom said that she wanted to try it...” She apologetically looked up at me.

That was fine with me—I was more than happy to welcome test subject number four. “Yes, sure. Just make sure to tell her that it is possible there will be side effects, or that it could not be well-suited for her type of skin.”

“And as soon as it starts to hurt, itch, or feel strange, she needs to stop using it immediately, right?”

“Exactly.” *As long as she follows that rule, she can use it as much as she wants.*

After all, I still owed a great debt to Lady Maika’s mother, Mrs. Yuika, for introducing me to the world of books.

After a bit of small talk, I went ahead and proposed we start our usual studying session. “Let us start today’s lesson, then. Do you want to practice writing again?”

“Before we start, I wanted to ask you about a word that I didn’t understand.”

“Oh, sure. Let us start with that.”

It was still mostly me who was in charge of Lady Maika's lessons. *Stop slacking off, Father Folke.*

Maika's Perspective

Hehe. Ash had held my hand. Hehe.

It had been a while since he had last grabbed my hand, so I had been nervous when he was tracing my palm, but remembering it now, I was smiling. It was amazing how I could be so happy from such a slight touch. Ash was amazing.

"So Ash said you could use it too." I reported to my mom that Ash had granted her request while putting the ointment wrapped inside a big leaf on top of the table.

If I was honest, I would have preferred to keep using it by myself, since it was a present from Ash, but he had said that my mom could use it too, so I shared it with her. At the end of the day, I didn't want him to end up hating me because I was hiding it from my mom.

"Thank you, Maika." My mom did not hesitate to put some on her fingers and rub it all over her hands. "My skin feels refreshed already! I will have to get your dad to compliment me once it's become softer!" She grinned.

She looked so happy. It was wonderful to see how well my parents got along. Although it was also a little embarrassing with all the children and adults teasing them about it.

"If it works, I will contact my family and... Maybe I can use Quid as a middleman to sell it..." Before I realized it, she had stopped smiling. She had a stern look on her face and murmured some difficult phrases. "But I am sure this will sell; the only problem is Ash..."

"Ash is a problem?" *What about Ash is a problem?* I felt a little bit offended.

"Oh, you are giving me the death glare."

Of course. If someone was going to do something bad to Ash, I was not going to forgive them, even if it was my own mom.

As I intensified my stare, she suddenly broke out in laughter. "You are scary,

Maika! To think that you were so attached to me and your dad until recently! But I guess your heart is with someone else now...”

You don't seem scared at all!

“Mom!!”

“Yeah, I know! I'm sorry! I didn't express myself very well—I won't do anything bad to Ash! Please forgive me.”

I guess I will forgive you this time. I crossed my arms and nodded to signify my pardon.

“Our daughter is too cute! You have been showing us so many new facial expressions ever since you realized you like Ash.”

“Is that related to Ash?”

“Is it not?”

I-I don't know. My mom looked satisfied seeing me turn my face away. She put on her victory face.

“Well, putting that aside, earlier I was just thinking that I needed to talk to Ash. We need to properly prepare or things are going to go wrong really fast, considering how amazing this ointment is.”

“Yes! Ash is amazing!”

“Yeah, much more than I anticipated...”

While I had become energized again, my mom had gone silent. That must have been due to Ash's influence too.

“By the way, Maika. I know that you are head over heels for Ash, but how about him?”

Uhm... “He seems to enjoy himself when talking to me?”

I tried answering as best as I could, but my mom sighed in disappointment. “I will help you too, Maika, but you will have to put in most of the effort by yourself.”

“But... I don't know what to do... How can I get Ash to like me?”

“...” My mom fell silent.

Don't put people on the spot if you don't know the answer yourself!!

“Hm... Yeah, that's a difficult question,” my mom continued. “But, you know, it looks like Ash quite likes me?”

What?!

“He has a different attitude when talking with me. Could it be that I made him fall for me?”

“Stop lying!!”

“I hope you're right and it's a lie.”

She was chuckling like a witch. Her smile was beautiful, but at the same time evil. Why was she talking about stealing Ash's heart, which was supposed to be mine? I couldn't believe that my own mother would have been so cruel and wicked.

“I will never hand over Ash!!”

“Is that something you can decide by yourself?”

“Yes! I have decided it!”

“Alright, I'm sorry,” my mom apologized, seeing how angry I was. Still, the smile on her face made me doubt her sincerity. “How about I invite Ash over for dinner as an apology?”

“Ash will have dinner with us?” That sounded good. Having dinner together almost made it seem as if he were part of the family. “He will sit next to me, right?”

“Of course. I have to sit next to your father after all,” she agreed without hesitation.

In that case, I guess I'll forgive you.

I was satisfied, but my mom was frowning. “Maika, could it be that you don't know what it means to invite someone over for dinner?”

“Eating dinner together?” Was there something else?

As I tilted my head, my mom touched her forehead and shook her head. It was the same motion that she always did when I covered my new clothes in dirt on the same day they had been bought.

“You see, Maika...” I stiffened upon hearing the irritated tone of her voice. “Unlike breakfast and lunch, dinner is precious family time.”

“Y-Yeah.”

“So, if you include someone from another family, it’s like saying you are okay with them becoming a part of your family.”

“What?!” *Becoming a part of our family? Does that mean we would become engaged?*

I felt my face blush at once. I mean, who could have stayed calm upon hearing their mom saying something so outrageous?

“D-D-Does Ash know this too?!”

“I am not sure; a lot of parents probably don’t teach these things to children your age,” she pondered, cheekily implying that she, however, had informed me. “Well, it’s mostly an understanding between adults. By extending a dinner invitation, you are informing the other family that your child probably likes theirs. If they accept the invitation, then that means that they think their child reciprocates those feelings.”

“He reciprocates my feelings? Is Ash gonna say he likes me?”

“As it’s only an understanding between adults, it’d only be a preliminary confirmation. You both won’t really have to say anything, but... you like Ash, right?”

“I don’t want to answer.” I was dying of embarrassment. Why did she look so troubled? She was the one that had put me on the spot. “So, does that mean that, if Ash accepts the invitation... Does that mean that he...?”

In that case, I’d peacefully die of happiness. Of course, I planned to actually live to see the dinner! My thoughts were racing, and it felt as if there was a festival going on inside of me.

“I want to say yes, but seeing that we are the village chief’s family, I am not so

sure. I don't think anyone would turn down an invitation from our house." My mother dampened my excitement with a regretful look on her face. "Earlier you were a bit hesitant when I asked you about Ash's feelings... Is he as smitten with you as you are with him?"

Those words were like a storm that made the festival inside of me come to a sudden stop. I wondered what my face looked like.

Before I knew it, my mom was hugging me. "It's alright, Maika. At least we know that Ash doesn't hate you, so we will do our best to make him your bridegroom!"

"...Yes." My answer came out in a barely audible, trembling voice.

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A while after Mrs. Yuika had started using the aloe ointment, Lady Maika invited me to have dinner with them. At the same time, she also asked for some more ointment, as it had been decreasing faster with two people using it.

The dinner invitation must have been a sort of compensation. Since I also profited from having them take part in my experiment, I had not expected anything in return, but such was the nature of human relationships.

On top of that, my parents had also pressured me to go, so I was currently knocking on the front door of the village chief's house.

Lady Maika opened the door. "Welcome, Ash." She seemed nervous.

"Milady, I have come at your request." I bowed as I tried to relieve the tension with a joke. Once again, I felt like I was making a fool out of myself.

"Hehe, you are talking weird again." At least this time it seemed that I had managed to calm down Lady Maika's nerves.

"Your dress looks good on you; you look even more gorgeous than usual."

It seemed that she had put on her best dress to welcome their guest, even if it was only me. I promptly complimented her to show that I appreciated her effort. After all, all girls loved having their carefully-chosen outfits praised.

In response, she turned bright red. "Th-Thank you! Y-You look great too!"

As expected, the daughter of the village chief had impeccable social skills, and returned the compliment, praising my Sunday clothes, which my mother had made me.

“You look great indeed, Ash—what a handsome gentleman!” Behind the bright-red Lady Maika, her mother Yuika, the most elegant woman in the village, appeared.

“I am flattered by your praise, Mrs. Yuika.”

“Let me welcome you inside.”

“Thank you.”

After being shown inside, I also thanked Mr. Klein, Lady Maika’s father and the village chief, who had been waiting in the living room. Even though the village chief was very competent himself, I considered Mrs. Yuika to be above him in the power hierarchy. After all, she was born the daughter of an influential family from the city. Both in terms of social status and in their relationship, he seemed to be overpowered by his wife. Although it did not even look like he tried to come out on top.

“Let’s get started with dinner, now that our lovely guest has arrived.”

The four of us sat down at a beautiful table. I sat next to Lady Maika, and opposite to Mrs. Yuika.

I was not yet fully accustomed to the etiquette of this world, but it seemed that there was a determined seating order. I just sat down in the seat I had been shown, so there were not going to be any problems. This was the first time in nine years that I had to consider table manners. I was a little nervous, but I tried my best not to look too disgraceful while eating.

“You are indeed a very smart gentleman, Ash,” Mrs. Yuika kindly praised me.

“Oh, I am just learning by imitating your impeccable table manners. By the way, you are a great cook, Mrs. Yuika; this food is delicious. It might not be my place to say this, but I envy you, Mr. Klein.”

“Did you hear, darling? Haha, this young boy just complimented me.”

As expected, Mrs. Yuika was leading the conversation. Her husband nodded

enthusiastically in agreement with a big smile on his face. I really envied their passionate relationship.

Next to me, Lady Maika seemed a little upset. I wondered if there were some vegetables she did not like. Some of the wild plants from this area were indeed quite bitter.

“Mom, did you not want to ask Ash something?”

“Hehe, Maika, you don’t have to pull such a face.”

Mrs. Yuika leaned on her husband while talking. I did not know what was happening, but I realized they were deeply in love with each other. While it was still early in the evening, I had a feeling that at some point the food might try to find a way out again. I guessed Lady Maika was feeling similarly about her parents flirting in front of a visitor. She pouted and frowned, but did no longer seem as upset.

“But she is right. Can I ask you something, Ash?”

“Yes, sure. If I can be of any help.”

“I wanted to ask you about your aloe medicine.”

“Is there something wrong with it?” My nervousness showed, as I started speaking a little bit faster.

I had paid close attention to Mrs. Yuika’s hands since entering the house, and I had not seen anything abnormal, so I wondered what it was...

“No, no. Everything is fine—or I should say, amazing. My skin looks so fresh and young!”

“I am glad to hear that!” I leaned back against the chair as I let out a sigh of relief. I would have never been able to forgive myself if any harm had come to Mrs. Yuika, to whom I owed so much. “What was your question then?”

“I have heard rumors that you intend to sell this amazing medicine through Quid. Is that true?”

I honestly replied with a nod. I planned to use my profits to improve the lives of everyone in the village, so I did not intend to hide anything.

“I see... In that case, I am a little worried.” Mrs. Yuika frowned.

“Oh, what is your concern?”

I was intrigued. Judging from the look on her face, it looked like there was some trouble, but even so, I was excited. Living in a dull village like this one, any small thrill was welcomed.

“I am sure your medicine will sell a lot, and as a result, you will receive a lot of money. However, that also means that you will stand out from the other villagers...”

“Ah, I see. Yes, I agree. Having such a clear wealth gap would most likely sow discord among the villagers.” I instinctively admired her concern for the village as the wife of the chief.

She blinked her eyes upon hearing my response. “I have heard Maika going on about it, but you indeed know a lot of difficult words.”

“Only because I am Master Folke’s number one disciple.”

I had learned almost nothing from that priest, but we were still comrades in the pursuit of knowledge. As such, I used him as an excuse for being such a weird child at times like this. It was all Master Folke’s fault.

“Folke must be proud of you. Hehe, I am glad you understand. I also talked to my hus—to the chief.” At this point, she was talking as the de facto village chief. “I applaud what you are trying to do, and I assure you that I don’t want you to stop.” It looked like she was very considerate of me being a child, and did not want to use her authority to suppress me. “However, I would like to help you, so that we can make sure there won’t be any problems later.”

“I greatly appreciate your advice. I now realize that I was about to cause a lot of trouble for the village.” I meant what I said. I had been naive and not thought far enough ahead.

I had not intended to waste the money on my own selfish desires, but I still would have needed to save the money for a while before buying anything. That alone might have been a breeding ground for jealousy if there had been rumors of me stockpiling money without any intentions of using it.

Both in my past life and in this one, it was easy to be perceived as a devil when money was involved. Furthermore, I was certain that my father would have used part of the savings to buy alcohol, making everyone aware of our growing wealth. In that case, we may have even been ostracized.

“Hmm... Well, in that case...” I wondered what could have been done.

Besides not knowing how much I was going to make, the money was most likely only going to come in in small chunks, since I produced the ointment all by myself. However, if I wanted to buy something that would benefit the village as a whole, I needed to save a lot of money.

“What to do...” While I was absorbed in my thoughts, I felt a figure next to me suddenly stand up.

“Don’t bully Ash!!” That figure was of course Lady Maika, who was glaring at her mother with a bright-red face.

I’m not being bullied. On the contrary, your mother is extremely kind.

“Oh my, are you defying your own mother, Maika?”

Mrs. Yuika, why do you smile like a movie villain? I mean, it suits you. And it might even make me fall for you... But still.

“I won’t forgive you if you are being mean to Ash!”

“Why? Ash was going to cause trouble.”

I had no comeback, as my actions would probably have destroyed the social relationships in the village if Mrs. Yuika had not intervened.

Regardless, it seemed that Lady Maika had plenty of things to say. “That’s not true! Ash was going to buy livestock for everyone, or farm tools! He was researching day and night to find out what would benefit the village most!”

“Oh, is that so?” Her mother forgot her villainous smile and put both her hands up to her cheeks in surprise.

However, Lady Maika, who was desperately trying to defend me, did not notice her change in attitude. “Yes, it’s true! Ash only wants the best for the village! He’s an amazing person!”

“He *is* wonderful, isn’t he?” Mrs. Yuika casually asked.

“Yes!!” Lady Maika reflexively agreed on the spot.

“I am a little bit embarrassed to be praised this much.” As I quietly murmured with a smile on my face, Lady Maika froze.

Her face turned redder than I thought was possible and she collapsed into her chair. I hurriedly caught her shoulders, but it looked like she had fainted. While I was shocked, Mrs. Yuika covered her mouth before breaking out in discreet yet hearty laughter. She was joined by her husband. They were like two peas in a pod.

“For a moment, I thought some sort of theater play had started,” I said.

“Our Maika is very cute, isn’t she?”

“Yes, she is lovely, but I was taken by surprise.”

“Were you? To be honest, I expected you to become just as flustered as her.”

Seeing the impish look and mischievous smile on her face, I almost wanted to be in the palm of her hands. However, the look of her husband brought me back to my senses. He seemed spellbound and devoid of any free will as he admired his wife’s facial expressions. I could not yield to temptation if I wanted to prevent a similar fate for myself.

“Putting all jokes aside, were you really thinking to use your money for the benefit of the village?” she asked.

“Yes, I feel that life in this village is quite hard, so I wanted to make it ever so slightly more bearable,” I answered with a serious look on my face, only narrowly resisting the temptress.

“In that case, couldn’t you just buy fruits or tools from Quid?”

I smiled politely at her suggestion. She was most likely trying to seduce me to test my commitment.

However, my past life memories were too vivid and plentiful for me to be satisfied with such minor improvements—I wanted life to be as comfortable as I remembered it. I did not want to achieve the best possible outcome under the current conditions; I wanted to raise the living standards to a whole new level.

I realized this was a pipe dream straight out of a fantasy book; it was impossible to achieve my ideal society within my lifetime. However, if I wanted to come as close as possible to fulfill my dream, I had to rely on the help of society as a whole. If it was impossible on my own, I had to rely on the combined strength of 100 people. And if that was not enough, I had to gather the strength of 10,000 people. I wanted to try my best at achieving this impossible dream.

“I am not going to pretend to be a saint and say something tacky like ‘Everyone’s happiness is my happiness.’” My lips started to form a smile. “However, it looks like the luxury life I desire requires everyone to be happy.”

Mrs. Yuika’s expression seemed to stiffen as she saw my fierce smile, fueled by my ambitious dreams. I wondered whether it looked vile or sinister. I did not know, but I did not care either—this was my way of life in this world.

On the other end, Mrs. Yuika asked with a firm voice, “What luxuries do you seek?”

“It is just a normal, child-like dream. I want to live a convenient and plentiful life as it is described in the stories of books, such as the legends from the ancient civilizations.”

I wanted water and sewer services accompanied by sanitary housing, air conditioning, and new clothes. I dreamed of filling my belly with delicious meals and alcoholic drinks. I prayed for machines to help with all the hard manual labor, and I yearned for a global mode of transportation faster than horses. I drooled just thinking about the conveniences of my beloved ideal civilization.

I did not know the principles, the structures, or the applications of these fruits of human knowledge. By myself, I was never going to complete the process all the way from discovery to material supply and production; I needed a lot of help. I needed the help of competent people.

Mrs. Yuika, you said earlier that you wanted to help me. In that case, I want you to show me a way for a greedy dreamer like me to keep on running without falling.

“So, would you be willing to get in on my business if I promised to donate the proceeds for the benefit of the village?” *If you join now, I’ll make you an*

executive manager, and you can expect a large share of the profits. I invited her with my most charming smile, although I imagined that it must have looked like a deal with the devil to her.



“I have to admit that you are a lot more interesting than Maika, but also scarier,” she said.

“I am sorry for being so eccentric, but I assure you I am not some sort of plague god.”

“I am glad that you made this proposal as the developer of this new product. I will gladly help you,” she answered with a smile beautiful like a flower, which immediately turned into the business-like smile you would see from a prolific manager being interviewed for a magazine.

“The pleasure is mine,” I closed the deal.

While there had been a blind spot on my part, it was fortuitous that I had been able to talk with the village chief this early and make her my ally. With this, it was also going to be easier to negotiate with Mr. Quid, and there was a possibility to make use of the chief’s personal connections in the city as well. Besides, I could count on her to point out any other weak points in my plan.

Of course, I also wanted to contribute myself. As proof of my sincerity, I decided to write down the recipe for the ointment and thro—give the manual to my new companion.

“I will write down how to make the ointment on a piece of paper and give it to you as soon as possible.”

“Are you sure it’s okay to give out your recipe so easily?”

“Of course. If you are going to help me, I will provide you with all the information I have.”

As it was quite a hassle to make the ointment, I was prepared to just hand over the copyright. As both Mr. Klein and Mrs. Yuika were able to read, I was confident they could recreate it as long as I handed them the instructions.

If the life of the village was going to become better in general, I did not mind only getting a bare minimum compensation. Honestly, I just wanted to repay Ban for buying me the pen and paper, as well as Mr. Quid for giving me a good deal. If I then could also get back the money for all the goods that I had used for my experiments, such as paper and pots, that would have been more than

enough. Anything more would have been a lucky bonus, which I could use as a deposit for Father Folke to buy new books.

“If it is going to sell well, we could always get the villagers to help us make the ointment; the process is not too difficult. But we should not get too ahead of ourselves—I will just leave it to your judgment.”

“Alright. And what are you planning to do after this?” Mrs. Yuika asked.

I'll go home and maybe curl up with a book.

I was joking. I knew that was not what she asked. She wanted to know what I was planning to do after so easily giving up my aloe recipe. I wished she treated me more like a child and was not so cautious.

“I will help Ban and Father Folke. I also need to read more books so I can gain new knowledge; there are a lot of things I want to do.”

Having created a medicine, I wanted to try my hand at poison next. Saying it like that made it sound quite dangerous, but I was talking about pesticides and rat poison. The latter was an especially high priority.

In fall, we were going to start stocking up the warehouse of grains in order to get through the short-but-tough winter. If I managed to devise a plan to deal with the rats by then, surviving winter was going to be much easier. I was not going to spare any effort to make our lives more bearable.

During summer, I was able to fulfill my wish of accompanying Ban on a weeklong hunt. It was exhausting to silently push on towards the depths of the forest, but it was a treat to eat a hunter's meal after setting up a simple tent made out of natural resources and starting a fire. The food, which was made out of freshly-gathered ingredients, always included some sort of meat, be it bird, land animal, or fish, and it rivaled even Mrs. Yuika's cooking.

At night, we both listened closely to the sounds of the forest. I had only known Ban since my accident a while ago, but I thoroughly enjoyed spending time with the silent hunter. It appeared that he was not silent because he did not know what to say, but rather because it was essential to his job. Just like a carnivorous mammal that stopped its breathing and sneaked up on its prey, a

hunter also tried to eliminate all sounds. As a result, he had become bad at conversation over time. It was a sort of occupational disease.

However, his silence was filled with ample knowledge; he was able to distinguish every single plant in his surroundings. From traces in the soil and vegetation, he was also able to tell which animal had been there how many days ago, and in what condition they had been. He also had full knowledge of all the food ingredients available in and around the spots where he placed his traps. Inside the woods, I followed his lead and kept silent—his motions taught me everything I needed to know.

At campsites, where it was okay to talk, he explained the meaning of the traces we had seen that day, and he taught me everything he knew about the wildflowers we had gathered, even though he was not used to talking. He was like a living book. While he never initiated any conversation, he always patiently shared his wisdom with me when I asked him a question. It was even fun to slowly decipher his quite peculiar handwriting.

Ban was the essential strategy guide for the woods; I definitely wanted to write down his knowledge on paper. If the village ever experienced a bad harvest, it was conceivable that many villagers would enter the forest in search of food even knowing the risks. In that case, having a strategy guide surely would drastically increase the survival rate and prevent reckless damage to the forest.

Thinking about the potential benefits for the village, I asked Ban—who was the copyright owner of this knowledge—for his approval. After all, those were important secrets of his job. If he seemed to be even a little hesitant to give them up, I was just going to make some notes for personal use.

After silently thinking about it for a while, as usual, he nodded.

“Are you sure? You were quite quick to agree.”

“We need more.”

What did we need more of? There were so many things here that were lacking that I was not sure what he meant. The most lacking thing of all was his words.

“Hunters.”

“Oh, you want more hunters?”

He nodded.

Apparently, the animals were bound to ravage the village’s fields once the forest ran out of food for them. In recent years, this had not been a problem, but eventually it would be. In that case, we needed to hunt a lot of animals, or the villagers would starve to death. Therefore, we required more hunters. Even now, Ban was slightly overwhelmed as the only person taking care of the forest.

“So that is why you have been teaching me so thoroughly.”

“Just in case.”

When push came to shove, he expected me to help. I had wondered why Ban was willing to go into such detail, but this explained a lot. Sure, he was kind to begin with, but he also had his own personal reasons.

“I will help however I can. Having our precious harvest destroyed will affect everyone.” Besides, it aligned with my goal to improve the lives of the villagers.

As I nodded several times in agreement, the silent hunter smiled and patted my head. He had a gentle expression about him, as if he was looking at his younger brother or son.

He was such a cool person; I did not understand how he was not married yet. It had to be because he was so silent.

Maybe Mrs. Yuika could help him find a partner. And then, hopefully there would be two or three more hunters next generation—everyone would win. ...As long as marriage did not become his tomb, that is.

After spending an unusually pleasant summer frolicking in the woods, I had to face the busy reality of farm work again in fall.

At the same time, I had received my first revenue from the aloe ointment. Mrs. Yuika said that she had first sent a sample to her parent’s house in the city. As a result, it looked like the first local export from our village had become an expensive product popular among the upper class. My first share consisted of

one copper coin, and that was only a part of the earnings. I wondered what the unit price was. Mrs. Yuika seemed extremely satisfied when she told me that she planned on continuing to sell the ointment as a rare limited product for a while, among other reasons due to the slow manufacturing process.

When Mr. Quid visited the village again, I lost no time to use the first earnings of my life as a token of gratitude to him. I wanted to compensate him for the losses which he had made when selling me paper and pen.

“Don’t be ridiculous! You don’t have to pay me back for that small amount! Use that money yourself on something you like! By the way, do you need any more paper or ink? Has your pen not broken yet?”

After refusing my proposal, he sold me some more under-priced paper and ink. I happily obliged, but I was also a bit worried that he held back too much. It would have been bad for me too if he went out of business.

“Are you sure it is fine to give me such a good deal?” I asked him.

“Yes, no problem at all! Thanks to you, business is booming, so this is the least I can do!” Was that so? Since I had distanced myself from the aloe ointment business, I was not aware of the circumstances. “Thanks to you, I have been able to make deals with the Amanobe family, who in turn introduced me to other rich families in the city! It’s a dream come true!”

I did not know the proper noun for this situation, but it seemed that he had become a merchant who was able to do business with upper-class families. It was a big upgrade from being a small peddler who traveled all around the place, and as such he was generous with his prices today.

“Oh, that is great! I am glad to hear your business has expanded!”

If he was happy, then so was I. And I would make sure to benefit from it as much as possible.

Thinking ahead, I was sure there were many things I would want once I received more money to use for myself. In that case, it would also be useful to me if Mr. Quid expanded his product range. It was indeed a splendid relationship from which both of us profited.

Next on my list was Ban, but he also refused to accept my money. He even

gave me some plants which he had just picked up in the forest.

“Thank you, Ban. But I feel a little bad to always just receive and never give anything back.”

“You do enough.” He uttered these words and proceeded to pat my head.

I persisted in my efforts to pay him back, but Ban just suddenly started talking about hunting techniques. *Wait, why are you talking so much more than usual today? There's so much to remember I have no time to think about the money. This seems important; I have to take notes on the paper I just bought.*

When it was time to go back home, I had not only failed to repay my debt, but it had become even bigger. I needed to think of a different way to pay him back, as it did not seem likely he was going to accept money.

“So, as no one wants to take the money, could you please keep it safe for me?” As a last resort, I decided to hand the money to Father Folke.

“Are you mistaking the church for a bank?”

“How about you consider it a donation that I can withdraw at any time?”

“That wouldn't be a donation!!”

Why are you resisting? I don't want to waste my time convincing you.

“You want me to keep it safe, but how can you be sure I won't steal it? I'm not that pure and honest.”

Is that something a priest should say? At least the honesty was befitting of his profession, but otherwise, that was quite the statement.

Still, even disregarding his priesthood, I would have been perfectly fine with Father Folke stealing the money.

“I would rather you steal the money than keeping it at home, where my father would inevitably find it and use it to buy alcohol.”

“You would rather I steal it? I'm not sure if that means you trust me or not...”

“In a way I do. At least I know that you will not use the money on alcohol, but most likely on books or writing materials for your research.”

“Hmm... To be completely honest, I'm currently broke because I've been

buying too many things. So, I'm afraid I will have to rely on your donation..."

My dear study nerd, this is why you are still single.

Generally, he was a very earnest and nice person, but when it came to studying, he lost track of everything else. Moreover, I was not sure if the fact that he was aware of his flaws worked in his favor or if it was just a sign of how far gone he already was.

"In that case, please use my money as you like. If you buy new books, or if it helps advance the decipherment of the ancient language, I will also be happy in the end."

"Are you sure?"

Father Folke suddenly showed an expression of joy more childlike than any of mine—those of a literal child—had ever been. A smile like that would have been popular with many women, but unfortunately, it did not change his personality.

"Oh... but... Wouldn't it look pretty bad from the outside if I used your money?" he asked in realization.

"I did not realize you cared about the opinions of outsiders."

"I mean, I'm a priest after all."

Then, could you please explain to me why you turned into a zombie priest for such a long time? "Well, if you worry about appearance, how about we consider it to be shared research funding? Both you and I can use the money as long as it is for research purposes."

"How would that be different from your previous proposal?"

"It would not; it would just appear different. As it is a shared research fund, we would also share the rights to the money." I tried convincing him that fixing the appearance was going to be good enough to address the trivial problem of public opinion.

Father Folke was racking his brain. "A shared research fund is indeed an interesting thought. It would have been nice to have something like that when I did research in the capital..."

“Research is expensive, after all.”

I imagined it was difficult to get a patron for plain research like deciphering ancient languages—it must have been tough for Father Folke and his fellow researchers.

All of a sudden, a knock interrupted our talk in his private study.

“Sorry for interrupting. I heard Ash’s voice, so I just let myself in. Is he here?”

“Hi, Maika! Is it already this late? It looks like it’s time for today’s lesson, Ash!”

“Yes, yes! I wonder if the day will come when Master Folke actually teaches a lesson.”

“I’m glad to have such a prodigy as you as my disciple.”

How dare he smile like that.

As I walked with Lady Maika towards the chapel, she looked discouraged. “I’m sorry I’m so slow at learning...”

“No, you are not slow at all.” I was surprised by her sudden apology.

Lady Maika was very quick at remembering new information. She was also very good at reading and writing already, even though she had an amateur teacher like me. I was sure she would have even been able to continue her studies without any more help from me—there was nothing she needed to apologize for.

Then, when I asked her if something had happened, I realized that our conversation just now was the reason for her discomfort.

“If this is about our conversation with Master Folke just now, I did not mean to imply that I dislike teaching you. I was just wondering why he has never taught you anything even though he is the actual teacher.”

“Oh, I see... I’m relieved I didn’t cause you any trouble.” She held her chest and let out a big sigh. She was such a kind person to worry about something like this.

“You are a very sagacious person, so it is easy to teach you,” I remarked.

“Sagacious... That means clever, right? Hehe.”

As you could see, her vocabulary had also expanded immensely. Some day she was going to be a very bright and talented beauty.

Lady Maika smiled bashfully and tilted her head. “But you were much faster at studying.”

“That is not true. I might have been fast at remembering once I took up lessons, but I had been studying in preparation before.” I was referring to my past-life memories. However, since I could not really explain that to her, I just rephrased it like that.

“Oh, I didn’t know that; you really are amazing.”

“I am just lucky.” I had never heard of anyone else having past-life memories. As such, I considered myself pretty lucky.

“No, it’s not just luck—you’re amazing! Even my mom is relying on you!”

“I am flattered.”

I was happy to hear her bring up someone as sharp-minded as her mother when complimenting me. Of course, Father Folke was also very bright, but in a different way.

“By the way, my mom told me to give you a message.” She lowered her voice. I guessed she must have been a bit jealous of her mother praising another child.

“What is the message?”

“My mom wants to make more aloe ointment, since it’s selling so well. She wants to enlist the help of other villagers, but what do you think?”

“I will leave it to your mother’s judgment.”

I had no clue in regards to management and business, so I completely entrusted those matters to the much-more-capable Mrs. Yuika. Even if she betrayed me, I would have just been in awe of her competence. Although I was not entirely sure if you could have called that trust.

“Okay, I’ll let her know!”

“Please do! I am sorry to have you relay the message.”

As I politely bowed my head, Lady Maika hastily shook her head and hands—she was flustered, but also happy. “Don’t worry about it! I don’t mind at all! You are always teaching me, so I’m happy if I can help you out in any way!”

I had learned from my mistake last time; I no longer treated her like a child, but rather as an individual woman.

Unexpectedly, she seemed happy when I thanked her for the message she had relayed. It once again showed how important manners were no matter who you were facing.

“Let us start today’s lesson, then! Have you encountered any problems in your studies?”

“Since starting to help with the ointment, I realized that I’m not very good with numbers.”

“Oh, yeah, that would indeed be a problem.” The recipe included different ratios, so I imagined it must have been difficult for her current level. “How about we focus on math today? We can use the aloe ointment recipe as an example.”

I figured I could kill two birds with one stone by focusing on it. For one, it was easier to remember using a familiar example, and at the same time, it was also going to help her prepare for the increased production system.

After leaving the decision to the manager, Mrs. Yuika, she chose to increase the production of the aloe ointment.

As the process was manual, it naturally involved hiring people. However, since the number of jobs was still limited, Mrs. Yuika decided to allocate the positions to villagers who were in financial distress. For example, families whose breadwinner had passed away or who had to deal with illness.

On top of that, she singled out the women who were not cut out for more strenuous physical labor. This was a way to maintain harmony in the village and take care of the weaker links before they started affecting the whole social structure. It was the same idea as a public project.

I was deeply impressed by Mrs. Yuika’s abilities as a business manager. Thus, I

accepted the invitation to be part of the team teaching the manufacturing process of the aloe ointment to the new recruits without hesitation.

As none of them knew how to read, the plan was that I and Mrs. Yuika were going to teach them the basics of the process before handing over supervision to Lady Maika. In a first step, we had the villagers create the ointment while we attentively showed them how it was done. It was not any more dangerous than cooking, so there were no incidents.

...Until after we finished.

One of the villagers, who had shown great interest in the test sample, murmured the following words, which I just could not let go.

“That reminds me of something my mom used to make.”

Oh? Had I heard that correctly?

I investigated the direction of the voice to find Lady Tanya. She was a rustic girl with freckles in her late teens.

“Tanya, could you tell me what you mean by that?” I asked her.

“Hm? Oh... No, it just looks similar, but it was something completely different, so you don’t have to worry.”

I’m afraid I can’t let you off so easily. How similar was it? How was it made? I was intrigued.

I had come up with the manufacturing process for the aloe ointment on my own, so it was quite likely that there was still room for improvement. My current recipe only required you to boil the aloe with tallow, mix it all together, and then let it harden. If there had been any books on medicine, I was sure the process could have been simplified.

“Unfortunately, you have piqued my interest. Why did it remind you of something your mother used to make?” I followed up.

“I’m not sure why...” Lady Tanya did not know how to reply and just smiled awkwardly.

“I am sorry to put you on the spot. Let me rephrase my question: what did it remind you of?”

“Uhm... Let me see...” She tilted her head while slowly thinking out loud.

While she was not a fast thinker, she was very agile and quick to act. She was the type of person who would act immediately after careful deliberation.

“My mom often made medicine that you could rub on your skin. You could also use it on wounds, but it was mainly to soften the skin.”

“Oh, that is wonderful; that sounds indeed a lot like my aloe ointment. And how was it different?”

“Hm... The ingredients were different.”

“Do you remember what ingredients she used?”

Lady Tanya nodded with a smile. “Yes, she used honeycomb!”

“Honeycomb? Not honey?”

“Yes, directly from the hive; we used the honey separately. I think there was one other ingredient, but I don’t remember what it was.”

“Honeycomb...” I once again murmured in surprise.

It was possible to make an ointment not from honey, but from the hive. How? Wasn’t the hive made of a hard substance? What substance was it, anyway? It seemed strange at first, but the surprise was lessened by the realization that I did not know the components of a beehive. Was it possible that it was another carefully-crafted, magnificent creation by the bees, just like their honey?

“It seems strange that you could use a part of the beehive to make something similar to this aloe ointment,” I said.

“To me, it seems stranger that you could make something similar out of leaves.”

“Haha, you may be right.”

“Haha, yeah.”

Very interesting. I wanted to learn more details, but it did not seem like Lady Tanya knew much more. Her mother surely could have taught me more, but unfortunately, both her parents had passed away—that was the reason why she had been recruited.

“By the way, Tanya, I have also seen you collect honey.”

“Yeah, my dad was a beekeeper. But I’m not good at it...”

It seemed that her father was the one who knew the beekeeping techniques. After he had deceased, her mother tried to keep up with the work, but unfortunately, she also died shortly afterwards.

The only ones left were Lady Tanya and her little brother, who had not had the opportunity to learn much about apiculture. As for Lady Tanya, all she knew how to do was to collect honey from beehives she happened to come across.

Apparently, Mr. Quid bought the beehives. However, since that only brought in some small pocket money, her main job had been working in the fields. The knowledge and techniques which had probably been passed down from the ancient civilizations were thus bound to come to an abrupt end.

“That is a shame...”

“I’m sorry. If only I had helped out more... But my mom always stopped me, saying that I wasn’t as good as Dad; she told me to go work in the fields.” She had a wistful smile on her face.

Of course, it was not her fault, but rather that of this horrible agricultural community. Lady Tanya was a victim who had been robbed of her parents.

“It is not your fault at all,” I said. “It is just that honey is nutritious and delicious. And especially if there is also a use for the honeycomb, I would be very interested in learning more about beekeeping.”

“It looks like you’re having an interesting conversation over here.” Mrs. Yuika had noticed my excitement and joined us.

“You have come at the right time.”

“Hehe, I overheard you. Beekeeping is indeed an essential occupation in this village. When Tanya’s parents were still alive, they not only made honey, they also produced candles—that helped us a lot.”

That was amazing. Learning that you could make candles from beekeeping got me even more excited. If we had access to cheap candles, we could have stayed up and been active much longer at night—it was a chance to increase our

productivity. Although it also created the danger of excessive overtime.

“What do you think, Mrs. Yuika? We do not have enough money to buy livestock such as horses or cows, but beekeeping seems like an achievable goal.”

“I agree with you, Ash.”

It was a splendid thought that a single occupation could produce multiple products at once. Besides, honey was easy to store and sold for a high price. It would not have been any problem to cover the expenses. It appeared that sweetness was a strong weapon in any world.

“Then, it is decided! The next step in improving the living standards of this village is going to be researching beekeeping!”

“I know we can count on you, Ash,” added Mrs. Yuika.

Don't speak too soon. I did not remember seeing any books on apiculture at the church. I needed to check with Father Folke, but it did not seem like there were any resources in this village.

“First, I will need to get my hands on a book. Until then, I am just a powerless little child.”

“I wouldn't say you are powerless at all, but you're right; the first step still seems a way off. I will contact my family in the city and try to gather information on beekeeping too.”

Both Mrs. Yuika and I smiled reservedly as we wondered when we were going to be able to start.

Bees started working in spring, and it did not look like we were going to make it in time for next year. I hoped that we could be ready for the year after next.

“By the way...” Lady Tanya slowly spoke up while tilting her head. “My dad had a book which he always kept close to himself. It had an image of a bee on the cover.” The girl with the freckles captured both mine and Mrs. Yuika's gaze with this statement. “Do you think it could maybe help you?” she hesitantly asked with a shy smile on her face.

That sounds like a lifesaver. I had not been aware that there were any books

in this village apart from in the church.

I carefully, wholeheartedly, and passionately asked Lady Tanya if she could let me see the book. She was quick to agree, but when I pressed her to see it right away, she hesitated, and she did not know how to reply. She said something about her house being a mess.

How is that relevant to the book? Books were always the same no matter where you read them, be it on a snow-covered mountain or on the stormy ocean. Unwaveringly, they told the stories and provided the knowledge enshrined in them. Although, the reader would have most likely wavered in such life-threatening situations.

As I tried explaining these thoughts to her, Mrs. Yuika and Lady Maika also jumped in to say that I could not just visit someone's house without warning. It looked like I was overpowered.

In that case, all I could do was hold back my tears and give...

"What if I read it outside?"

...Or I could try and find another way! I will not give up that easily! I will persist until the bitter end!

"Outside?" she asked.

"Just outside of your house, I mean. Please let me have a look!"

"Do you really want to read it this bad?"

I was offended by her question! "Of course! Why do you even need to ask?"

For some reason, Lady Tanya looked away from me. Mrs. Yuika also started slowly shaking her head. And even Lady Maika was giving me a cold stare.

"Are you still not going to agree? Why? What do I have to do to get a look at this book? I will do anything you want!"

"Okay, okay! ...You can have a look," she finally accepted, as she should have done from the start. I calmed down by taking a deep breath. "Uhm... Would you just come to my house then?"

"Yes, I will go right away! I will see you later, Maika and Mrs. Yuika!"

I wanted to go as soon as possible to make up for the time I had wasted on trying to convince her, so I went ahead by myself. While I had never visited her house before, I knew where she lived given how small the village was.

“I always thought Ash was much quieter,” Lady Tanya remarked.

“I think that’s the impression most villagers have,” Mrs. Yuika said.

“But that’s just another one of his charms. Ah, can I tag along too, Tanya?” Lady Maika asked.

Behind me, I heard the women talk to each other. *Just hurry up and come along.*

After sitting cross-legged and eagerly waiting in front of Lady Tanya’s house for three minutes, I finally got my hands on the book. However, the moment that I saw it, I started to get nervous.

It was more damaged than I had expected—the binding was in pieces. It did not look like it had been handled roughly, so I assumed it was natural deterioration. I should not have had her bring a book like that outside.

With a feeling of regret, I turned the pages. I knew that it would have been better to carefully read it somewhere inside, but I could not wait to open it. I intended to remember as much information as possible; it was time to focus all of my motivation, willpower, and persistence.

Judging from the title, it looked like I had guessed right. It was slightly blurred out, but it read, *“Introduction to Practical Beekeeping.”*

“This is amazing!”

The explanations were so detailed that I was tempted to call this a super-technology, given the development of this village. It described which types of bees were best suited for beekeeping, including their activity radius and ideal temperatures expressed in precise numbers. Of course, it also went into detail about the correct treatment of the bees, how to collect the honey, and how to prepare them for hibernation. There were even pages on the processing of the honey—this book alone had enough information to start a beekeeping business by yourself.

Just as important—or maybe even more important—was the date of the book. It looked like a handwritten copy of a very old monograph. Judging from the characteristics of the letters, I guessed that it was the descendant of a copy of a book from the late period of the ancient civilization.

To be clear, it was such a precious and archaeologically-relevant specimen that I could not believe it originated from this village. I wanted to show it to Father Folke, who was sure to become ecstatic.

“This is truly amazing.”

“Really? So... do you think it'll help with beekeeping?”

“Definitely. I will have to read it in more detail, but with this book, we can start keeping bees. The rest we can learn through experimenting and actually engaging with the work.”

I carefully closed the book; I was too scared to read any more in this spot. Although I had to admit that it was also a pleasant feeling to have this book in my hands.

“Tanya, do you happen to know how your father got a hold of this book?”

“If I remember correctly, he used to say that it's a family treasure.” I was not surprised to hear that—this truly was a treasure. “It seems that our ancestors got a hold of this book and started a beekeeping business, which was really successful. Apparently, they were well known... But that's only a family legend.” She smiled hesitatingly. It seemed that Lady Tanya, a remaining descendant, did not believe the tale.

“I am sure it is true. I wonder how your ancestors were able to read this book; the beekeeping techniques written inside are highly advanced.”

There was surely still some trial and error involved, but the success rate must have been very high. The author had based his information on numerous experiments carried out by either themselves or other pioneers.

“Besides, this is an extremely valuable ancient book. It is really not an overstatement to call it a treasure,” I added.

“What? But it was just lying around at our house.”

“It truly is a family treasure. Your ancestors must have taken good care of the book and protected it until now.”

I softly put my hand on the cover. I wondered how many years this silent sage had lived. How many people had profited from its knowledge? It must have been a long time since Lady Tanya’s family was able to read the book. But even so, they kept this silent sage as a family treasure and protected it from the tyrant called time until it ended up right here in my hands.

It must have been bothersome to painstakingly protect a book that you could not read; a seemingly meaningless task that you could have easily abandoned. However, this book had persevered up to now. At a point in time where Lady Tanya had lost sight of the teachings of her ancestors, it resurfaced. I felt in it the resolute and brave will to resist the tyrant called time.

“This is a family treasure that several generations of your ancestors and your parents kept protecting over the years; I am sure the contents want to be passed down to you.”

“The contents?”

“I mean the beekeeping techniques that have been passed down in your family. Don’t you want to try it yourself?”

“Me, a beekeeper?” she murmured with a stunned face, as if she had been swept away by a dream. “But... I can’t read...”

“That does not matter.” *If you can’t hear the voice of this silent sage, I’ll use my voice instead.*

In that moment, I was sure that this was my calling. If there was such a thing as the meaning of life, then surely this was it. There was just one question left.

“Tanya, do you want to learn these lost techniques or not?”

All you needed was the will to fight against the tyrant called time. It was a choice between letting the knowledge get swept away by the flow of time or firmly holding on to it to save it from such a cruel fate, and preserve it for the next person.

“I absolutely want to learn them! It’s been my dream forever!” she replied

without any hesitation. She must have been considering this already for a long time. It seemed that she had an admiration for her parents, which had only grown stronger after their death. “I want to do it; I want to try becoming a beekeeper, just like my dad and my mom.”

Welcome, fellow dreamer. And thank you. I offered a prayer of gratitude to Lady Tanya and her ancestors. Their longstanding fight had finally been rewarded; their knowledge—which was on the verge of disappearing—had found an inheritor.

“This means we are about to get busy!” *And just as we are about to enter the important fall harvesting season too!*

However, if we prepared as fast as we could, it was possible to finalize everything for next spring. Since we needed a small test run anyway, it did not need to be flawless as long as it was quick. Done was better than perfect.

“If you do not mind, I would like to borrow this book. Since it is your precious family treasure, I would keep and read it at the church.”

“Uhm... If you are going to take good care of the book, I don’t mind.”

“Of course! I will personally make sure that anyone who handles this book too roughly ends up dying a horrible death!”

For example, I could use them as a test subject for one of the many poison recipes I’ve developed in my attempts to create an effective rat poison. I know how much kills my guinea pigs, but so far, I haven’t yet attempted any human experiments. Hopefully one of the recipes is fatal. According to my reference book, some of them have the potential to be substitutes for anesthesia or cardiostimulant drugs, so I can try to drag out their suffering for as long as possible.

While I passionately thought about the best ways to administer justice to such abominable criminals, Lady Maika and Lady Tanya both looked at me with a slight look of fear in their eyes. *Please rest assured; I’m not a bad guy.*

While retaining some dread on her face, Lady Tanya gladly handed me over the book. I could not wait to show it to Father Folke. It was severely damaged, but I hoped that, as a trained librarian, he was capable of mending it or at least

preventing further deterioration.

I wanted to run towards the church, but as Lady Maika was beside me, I made an effort to walk slowly.

“Maika, could you relay a message to your mother for me?”

When I asked her this question, her face lit up. “Sure, no problem!”

“Can you tell her that we will be able to start beekeeping and that Tanya will be in charge of it? Just those two things. We will probably need to hold a meeting in a few days’ time.”

“Okay, got it. Can I also read this book?”

“Of course! There may be some difficult passages, but if you manage to get past those, your reading will improve a lot very quickly. I am sure you will enjoy it.” I looked forward to sharing this wonderful knowledge with her.

I looked at Lady Maika with a big grin on my face and she reciprocated with a mildly embarrassed smile. It was good having friends; it made me feel all fuzzy inside.

Suddenly, another voice interrupted this peaceful atmosphere.

“Hey, Ash!”

The displeased voice belonged to Lady Tanya’s brother, Jigil, who was two years older than me. He had been one of the members of my group when I had the accident in the forest.

He was accompanied by the second member of that group and another boy who often hung out with them. They were all lively young children who loved to play in the dirt and always ended up getting scolded at home.

“What is it?”

“Come over here for a moment.”

I wondered if he exceptionally wanted me to play with them. However, judging from his angry look and the unfriendly attitudes of the other boys standing behind him, it looked like very rough play.

I had already experienced it in spring, during the foraging, but it seemed that

the children of this village, or more specifically the boys, hated me.

“I am afraid I have to take this important book to the church. But please invite me again some other time!” I politely declined. I did not have time to deal with bullies in this world.

“Are you afraid?”

“Yes, I am.” In response to his cheeky provocation, I acknowledged my fear with a smile.

I did not want to unnecessarily get hurt in a village without any doctors. Even a light scratch could easily turn fatal here due to the likes of tetanus. I was not too afraid of Jigil himself, however.

It seemed that he had guessed my inner thoughts, as I saw his face quickly turn red in anger.

“Let us go, Maika. I do not want to leave this book out in the open air for too long.”

“Ash, you coward! Don’t run away!” As Jigil was shouting in rage, his friends unanimously joined in.

They were throwing some charming insults towards me such as “weakling” and “loser,” but my spirit was not going to break that easily—at most, it had some minor cracks.

Before I found myself responding to them, I turned my back and pressed on. I also did not want Lady Maika to be late, but when I looked at her, she was sulking and seemed more annoyed at the abuse than me. It was cute, but I was not sure if that behavior was befitting of the village chief’s daughter.

“Are you just going to let them insult you like that? I know that if you get serious, you could beat them to a pulp!”

Considering they outnumbered me, I was not confident I would have won in a fistfight. I was not even confident I could have taken on Jigil by himself, as two years’ difference meant a lot at this age.

As Lady Maika was whispering her complaints into my ears, their shouts seemed to get worse. At the same time, her face turned grimmer.

“I’m going to tell them off!!” she yelled.

“Just let it go, Maika.”

If it had been possible to calm down humans with a simple phrase like that, they surely would have been much nobler and more advanced creatures. My attempt had seemingly made her angry towards me too now, so I tried defusing the situation with a forced smile.

“You look cute when you are angry too, but I prefer you when you are smiling.” *So please let us hurry to the church.*

When I grabbed her hand and pulled her towards me, her face—and for some reason Jigil’s face—turned bright red. That reaction was a little unexpected, but since she had calmed down, I briskly walked with her hand in hand towards the church. The situation had not been resolved, but at least I had not engaged in any stupid behavior while holding onto the rare book.

But unfortunately, it seemed that I had spoken too soon.

As I felt movement behind my back, I turned around to see Jigil picking up a small rock. I briefly pondered the meaning of his motions and arrived at a conclusion that sent chills through my spine—this was nothing less than an intent to kill.

I instantly made Lady Maika hold on to the book and stood in front of her as a shield.

“I hope you are not intending on throwing that rock.”

“Do you have a problem with that?!”

Obviously, I do.

I did not know why he hated me so much, but I was not going to forgive him if he ended up damaging the book. If worst came to worst, I would have to get Lady Maika to protect the book to death.

However, I wanted to avoid that scenario, so I tried to calm him down. “I warn you: if you are going to use that rock, I will consider that a declaration of war without any restrictions and I will fight back with any weapons at my disposal!”

I tried to sound as tough as possible in an attempt to have him recognize me

as an unbeatable enemy.

“I will repeat myself: I will fight back with any means possible. I will use spears, traps, and even poison. I will continue fighting you in every conceivable way for the next several years or decades. If you are going to throw that stone now, I will never forgive you.”

While I talked about my means of attack, Jigil flinched. Maybe he remembered that I was learning the ways of the hunter. I kept staring at him for a while to make sure he did not make any strange movements before turning my back on him once again.

I was sure that he would have ended up running away at some point, but I broke our staring contest first because I could not be bothered much longer. Most of all, I wanted to get the book indoors as soon as possible.

On the way to the church, I held on to Lady Maika’s hand, who had frozen.

“Thank you, Ash... For protecting me back there,” she murmured while looking away.

“I just did what anyone would have done.”

The book on beekeeping is a precious resource, after all.

Maika’s Perspective

Ash had been amazing today! He was always amazing, but he showed me a side of him I hadn’t seen before.

To begin with, I didn’t know he could become so excited. When he asked Tanya to show him the book, he expressed a selfishness like you would expect from a boy his age. Although he still used the same difficult words as usual.

It seemed that Ash pressed on until he got his way once he became absorbed in something. It was the same intensity as the river in our village when it overflowed from heavy rain; everyone knew that it was futile to try to stop such a force.

I wondered if he was also going to go after me like that once I got him to like me. I hoped so! I felt excited just thinking about it.

Still, though, he shouldn't have directed that energy towards Tanya; it's not good to just suddenly want to visit a girl's house. I wouldn't have minded it myself... although I probably would have needed to clean up a little bit.

But then, it had been even more amazing when Ash got angry! When Jigil tried to throw a stone at us, Ash turned against him so angrily. I'd seen him get bullied before, but I didn't remember seeing him respond like that. He had been furious.

I'd always thought that my mom was the scariest when she got angry, but Ash might have been even scarier. And in his anger, he had stood in front of me. He had given me the precious book he had borrowed from Tanya in order to protect me from the rocks. Even though he was shorter than me, looking at his back in that moment made him seem so reliable; I felt like a princess being protected by her knight.

When I got back home, my mom asked me how things had been with Ash, so I happily told her everything. However, for some reason, she focused on Jigil and his friends rather than on how cool Ash had been.

"Why are you asking about Jigil and his friends? They're always like that."

It seemed that they hated Ash. They always bullied him, but he never responded because he was so mature.

"Maika, please listen to me."

"What is it?"

Why was she so serious?

"Do you still like Ash?"

Don't ask me something that makes me blush all of a sudden! I was embarrassed, but she didn't look like she was teasing me; she had a severe look on her face.

"Yeah, I still... or maybe even..." *I think I like him more every time we meet.*

"You don't have to say anything more." I didn't manage to get the words out properly, but my mom was sharp, and she knew what I was thinking. "Let me tell you then what I think you need to do in order to stand next to Ash."

“Stand next to Ash? Do you mean as his wife?”

“There is a good chance that might happen. When I previously talked to you, I wasn’t sure what to do myself, but now I know one thing that you need to do for sure.” That sounded important. I straightened myself in preparation for her advice. “I think there will be many more people like Jigil who appear in front of Ash in the future.”

Really? I instinctively frowned.

In the end, Ash had scared them off, but before, Jigil had tried throwing a rock, and he and his friends said many horrible things to Ash, who hadn’t minded at all. I knew that I was wrong, but it bothered me so much that I had gotten angry in his place.

“As you know, Ash is amazing—even I am surprised. And I’m sure he will do many more amazing things.”

Although she was praising him, her expression seemed a bit scary—I felt a tingling on my back. I expected her to tell me to not get too excited, as she usually did.

“A lot of people will focus their attention on someone as amazing as Ash. Unfortunately, not all of them will be supportive like you and me. Many of them will be like Jigil; they will dislike him.”

Why can’t everyone just support him? That was my reflexive thought, but I quickly realized that things would most likely go the way my mom had said. I felt sad. As the daughter of the village chief, I knew what it felt like to be the center of attention as someone who is privileged.

“I think I understand...” I said.

“As a parent, I regret that I have to make you realize this.” She had a melancholic expression that quickly turned into her usual fierce look. “But at the same time, the fact that you have enough experience to come to this realization means that you have the potential to stand by Ash’s side.”

I hope that’s true.

“Maika, you need to gather all the people who support Ash and make sure to

cut everyone else off.”

Cut them off? Does she mean...? “With a sword?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean you should do it your father’s way. You know how we keep the perishable things separate in the warehouse? I meant it like that.” Cutting them with a sword would have been much faster, but apparently that was a no go. “Anyway, you need to protect and support Ash, so that he can pursue his passions!”

“I need to protect him?”

I needed to protect Ash, who was more mature and reliable than myself?

“It may be difficult now, but the time will come when he needs someone to look after him. And that person will become the closest to him.”

I didn’t see it that way, but until now, my mom had almost always been right.

“If you say so...”

“I wish I could do it for you. Hmm... I wonder if I should give it a go?”

“No! You stay back!” I’ll do it myself! I’m not going to let the person who stole— I mean, who almost stole his heart, get any closer to him. I will protect Ash! From my mom!

As I threatened her by raising both my hands, my mom responded with a gentle smile. I didn’t expect that. At first, I thought she was going to tease me again, but she was serious.

“Yes, please take care of Ash. I’ll teach you all I know about protecting someone.”

“...Thank you.” I didn’t know what got into me, but I just thanked her.

My mom gently patted my head. *It looks like she wants me to do my best.*

It looked indeed like a lot of work was ahead of me. This meant protecting the same Ash who had pressed Tanya for the book today, with the force of a river overflowing from heavy rain. I felt a chill go through my spine. *I’ll give it my best! ...But I wonder if I can do a good job.*

“Wait, but that means that I’d need to play the role of the knight in the fairy

tales! I would rather be the princess!”

I wanted to feel like I did in that moment, when Ash stood in front of me today.

My mom started giggling and broke the serious mood when she heard me complain. “Can’t you ask him to treat you like a princess after you get married?”

“...You’re right.”

Once again, I realized how clever my mom was.

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Several days later, I met up with Mrs. Yuika and we decided to have a trial phase for beekeeping next spring.

It was on a small scale—the members involved were Lady Tanya as the actual beekeeper, me as an adviser, and Mrs. Yuika, who provided the funding. Lady Maika also volunteered to help, which we all gladly welcomed.

As a result, Lady Tanya also joined our study group at the church. She was not going to learn how to read and write, but she had to remember and understand all the information on beekeeping from her book by next spring.

However, I still taught her some reading and writing as well as math, since I figured it did not do any harm. As she had some experience observing her father, she was quick to understand the techniques from the book. It was heart-warming to see how happily she nodded her head whenever she learned about a new aspect of her parents’ job.

“Hmm... My dad left me some simple tools which we could repurpose after some repairs.”

“I am sure Mrs. Yuika would appreciate that. Can you check what we have for next time? The rest we can just buy from Mr. Quid.”

“That leaves us with the question of where to put the beehive box.” Lady Tanya tilted her head with a slightly worried look.

It seemed that her father had placed the boxes on his own, and neither she nor her mother had received that knowledge. As honeybees operated in a wide range, it did not really matter where you put the beehive if your sole purpose

was to collect honey. However, if you intended to obtain high quality honey in large quantities, you needed to select the location carefully. According to the book, it was normal to change locations each season too.

“The best place would be near the fields.”

As I murmured, Lady Tanya in front of me agreed right away. Lady Maika next to me thought about it for a while before she was convinced too. It was proof that both of them understood the contents of the book.

As for permission, it was pretty much guaranteed that we could place a box near the fields, since farmers always welcomed bees, which pollinated their crops. They eagerly prayed for an increase in the harvest of summer vegetables, as well as wild strawberries, which grew in the outskirts.

“And I guess inside the forest,” I added.

“Yeah, that would be ideal. My dad used to enter the woods each season to replace the box, but since it’s dangerous, my mom never did it herself, and she didn’t let me do it either.”

Since summer, I had started to regularly go inside the forest with Ban, and it was harder than I had expected. As there were no humans entering at all, there were only animal trails, many of which you could not even use. The thick vegetation and vines did not give away any hints; on the contrary, they often obstructed the way. No matter how often I slipped, I never got used to that feeling of having a plant touching me and getting shudders down my spine.

“If we limit ourselves to the village, we can indeed only conduct it on a small scale. That is probably why your father was prepared to enter the dangerous forest.”

“Yeah, I think so too.”

“I will ask Ban, our forest expert. He might know a place that is comparatively safe and can be used for beekeeping.”

It seemed that among the places that he had not shown me yet, there was a spot where different fruits were growing. That seemed like a suitable environment for the bees. There was also a spot that turned into a flower field depending on the season. Once, I visited it myself, and I had been in awe of its

incredible beauty when first seeing it.

However, I did not want to place the beehive there. While the flowers looked pretty, they also carried poison often used for hunting; I did not want anyone to collect honey in such a place.

“I met with Ban the day before yesterday, so today...” I was trying to remember his hunting schedule to determine whether he was in the village today or not when Lady Tanya looked at me wistfully. “What is it, Tanya?”

“You are very close to brother Ban, right?”

“Yeah, he is taking care of me... Wait, did you just say ‘brother Ban’?”

I had never heard the silent hunter talk about a sister, nor had I ever heard any rumors like it.

“Oh, no; we are not related. It’s just that he used to visit our house often when I was a child.”

Her face had turned as red as a ripe apple. It was the first time I saw this charming expression of hers. I noticed that Lady Maika’s mouth was open, as if it had piqued her interest too.

“Do you not agree that is convenient, Maika?”

“Yeah! That’s lucky!”

At times like these, when she wholeheartedly agreed with me, I felt that we had become much closer over the past year.

“Wait! We are not related!!”

“I know, I know.” Anyone would have agreed with a cute young lady like her; her embarrassment made it only more adorable. “But you have known Ban for a long time, right?”

“I guess so? But it’s more like our parents were colleagues, since they both often went into the forest and Ban was the son of the hunter.”

“Ah, I see. Both your parents were connected through their work, which led them into the forest. In that case, Ban might still know the locations where your dad used to place the beehives.”

“Do you think so?”

There were a lot of things to consider, and I had a lot of questions to ask Ban the next time I saw him.

“I will ask him when he is available. It looks like it might be a long meeting.”

I sent a glance towards the quick-witted Lady Maika, who agreed. “Yeah, it looks like we have a lot of things to talk about. I’ll ask my mom for advice too, so we can decide how to discuss things.”

Lady Maika was not very good at putting on an act. As the daughter of the village chief, the skill to properly express yourself with words and gestures seemed important—I needed to report this to her mother.

Recently, the astute and beautiful Mrs. Yuika had been asking me about her daughter’s performance. However, she was not just asking about her studies, but also about her behavior and mannerisms, most likely in preparation for high-society parties in the city. She said that I should report anything which caught my attention. Since then, I had been paying close attention to Lady Maika’s actions. If she was going to be successful at socializing in the city, I was sure that it would also have a positive effect on this village.

Putting aside Lady Maika’s social skills, a few days later she delivered a message from her mother saying, “Negotiations are best held in a comfortable setting while eating food. How about you have dinner together with Ban and Tanya while reminiscing about the past?”.

Lady Tanya did not become flustered when she heard that message. She looked uneasy, but showed us a bright smile beaming with happiness.

When I explained the situation to Ban, he asked me to accompany him on a hunt. He was busy, and in order to set aside some time for a discussion, he had to tighten his schedule inside the forest. It was not impossible to do it by himself, but he wanted me to help him.

I could not refuse. It was the best for our beekeeping venture, but also for the pure Lady Tanya. And of course, I also wanted to help out Ban, who was still single despite being such a good man. This was a bit selfish of me to say, but I

wished for him to contribute to the population growth of the village.

“Thanks for coming.” At night, sitting around the bonfire, the silent hunter started to speak. This was my favorite time. “We got a big prey with the deer walking into the trap,” he added.

Our dinner consisted of blood stew with deer innards, flavored with early autumn wild plants. It was a hearty hunter dish where you cooked the organs of the deer with the prey’s blood—it was extremely delicious.

Some people might have been disgusted at the mere smell of it, but I was addicted to the rich flavor. The moment I put it in my mouth, it felt like the food was becoming one with my body. It was such a satisfying pleasure to wholly consume the life of another living being.

“For myself, a deer is too...” the hunter began.

“It is too much to eat, right? I imagine you would have been eating a wolf, or maybe a boar, like the one we caught yesterday.”

We had not caught the boar in a trap, but rather we had followed its tracks and finished it off with a spear. It was not very big, but extraordinarily fierce, and its headlong rush had been an impressive sight. Without Ban’s precise teachings, I would not have been able to kill the boar with a spear.

We ended up eating its organs last night. However, since the spear had been covered in poison, we had not been able to use the blood, and it was only possible to eat the organs once they had been well cooked.

Ban’s poison became neutralized once you heated it up. As I had no experience with poison in my past life, I was not entirely sure, but I guessed that it was a type of wolfsbane.

“I am glad that I could help you, and that you are such a great hunter.”

As I cheekily implied that I very much enjoyed eating so much meat, Ban patted my head. I was no longer at a mental age where I enjoyed having my head patted, but I was happy to receive praise from someone whom I admired. During the hunt, he was a trustworthy superior, after all.

“Tanya...” he muttered.

“Yes, what about her?”

I had become used to his pattern of speech. Most of the time, Ban did not finish his sentences, so I had to make an effort to extract the rest out of him.

“...wants honey.”

“Are you talking about beekeeping? Tanya’s family had a wonderful book that will allow us to revive apiculture in this village. Oh, and she wants to become a beekeeper herself too. I think she was proud of her parents’ work from a young age. Moreover, we also have the support of the chief, since it is a very important occupation for the village.”

I was talking while checking Ban’s reactions, and since it looked like he wanted to hear more, I just kept talking by myself. Although he was a good listener, it was rare for Ban to ask for information.

“Ash.”

“Yes?”

“Thanks.” The unsociable Ban spoke with a blunt expression, yet in a gentle voice.

From this exchange, I finally understood why he had been single for so long. If my hunch was right, he must have felt abashed.

Lady Tanya did not do any beekeeping in the forest and mainly worked in the field. On the other hand, Ban mostly spent his days in the woods and did not know anything about field work. Even if they liked each other, there would not have been many opportunities for Lady Tanya to interact with this poor talker. The news that she had volunteered to become a beekeeper was a chance for the two to reconnect.

“I am glad I can be of any help, however little it may be.”

I had to report this to Mrs. Yuika as soon as I got back—we were going to produce a new marriage. My current goal was to improve the productivity of this village so that our lives would improve. In turn, with increased living standards the population would grow, leading to an increase of the labor force and once again circling back to an increase in productivity. It was an important

part of the plan to realize my dream. But even putting all that aside, I was happy to support both of them.

“I bet you cannot wait to talk to her.”

Ban was slightly flustered while scratching his head.

“It is going to be fine. To Tanya, you are an important collaborator who has a deep knowledge of the forest; you are the perfect partners to work together. This is a cooperative of fate.” And since I knew how Lady Tanya felt, I added the following, “Besides, Tanya is afraid to go inside the forest by herself. Even Mrs. Yuika said that she wants you to accompany Tanya whenever possible. We want to ensure the best environment for the beekeeping business; it is an essential part of developing the village.”

I had not yet talked to Mrs. Yuika about this, but I was going to bring it up in the near future. Ban and Lady Tanya were made for each other, so I wanted them to end up together as soon as possible.

The first formal marriage meeting—I mean, the meeting to discuss the beekeeping cooperative between Ban and Lady Tanya—took place at the village chief’s house. On one side of the table were Ban and his interpreter, me, and on the other side were Lady Tanya and her supporter, Lady Maika. The leader of the meeting was the seasoned Mrs. Yuika.

Jigil was not present. Lady Tanya had talked to him about reopening their beekeeping business, but he was going through a rebellious phase and gave a negative answer. At this stage, his absence did not pose any problems at all. Once we entered the production phase, I hoped he was going to cooperate as a worker.

“Come on, Tanya, you have to ask first.” Lady Maika was whispering to the nervous Lady Tanya, whose shoulders had stiffened.

“Uhm... yes... so... It has been a long time, brother Ban.”

“Since the day before yesterday.”

“Ah, yeah, right.”

That was not a long time at all, but in a small village like this, you were bound to run into each other. Even more so considering that Ban liked her.

This was bad. Lady Tanya, who messed up, did not know what to say next. For Ban, I had not had any hopes from the start.

Thus, I stepped in to keep the conversation moving. “But I imagine it must have been a while since you were last able to talk in a relaxed setting like this.”

“Yeah, that’s true.”

Ban just nodded in agreement after Lady Tanya’s statement.

“So, you both have been acquaintances from a young age?”

“Yes, our parents often talked to each other,” she said.

“Played a lot.”

Lady Tanya flustered at Ban’s words; she seemed happy to hear him share his memories.

“It is nice to see old acquaintances join forces to help the village after growing up—that is a wonderful relationship. Don’t you think so too, Maika?”

“Y-Yeah! It’s wonderful! I’m even a bit jealous of them.”

It seemed that, while Lady Maika had tried to encourage the two young lovebirds, she was now embarrassed over her own words. Her face turned bright red.

I did not know whether my words had given her a push or whether she had found new resolve herself, but Lady Tanya suddenly looked up and gazed at Ban.

“Brother Ban! I’m really grateful that you’ve always taken such good care of me. And I’m a little embarrassed to ask more of you, but...”

Ban was listening closely to her desperate plea. The silent hunter replied with brief nods while looking at her directly in the eyes.

“I want to try becoming a beekeeper like my dad and my mom! Can you please help me?”

“Sure.”

Lady Maika looked a bit worried, as Ban's short reply probably sounded cold to someone who was not accustomed to his pattern of speech. However, her concerned expression gave way to a look of surprise as he continued on with an uncharacteristically long utterance. Even I had never heard him speak so much at once.

"I remember where your father used to place the beehives. There are some other good places in the forest too. It will have to be when I'm free or as a detour while I'm out hunting, but I'll gladly help you, if that is what you want."

"Thank you! Thank you so much, brother Ban! I..."

"You don't have to thank me." Ban gently patted Lady Tanya's head. She was overcome with emotion and covered her mouth. "I just want to help you."

Seeing them interact, I gave a signal to Lady Maika and her mother—all three of us had reached the conclusion that it was time to leave the two lovebirds alone.

"We will go prepare the food," Mrs. Yuika pronounced with a quiet voice before we all got up and swiftly left the room.

It was extremely uncomfortable to be a third wheel. Their strong affection for each other was filling up the room and exerting an osmotic pressure on our minds to a point where we almost turned into dried fish. Even though I had only been there a short time, I was mentally exhausted.

On the other hand, as a married person, Mrs. Yuika seemed unaffected as she laughed cheerfully. "Hehe, I'm glad it turned out alright."

"Indeed. But it is strange how such a trivial occasion led to such a huge push forward."

It was even stranger that nothing had happened until now.

"Well, that's the way things are. Emotions are easily moved up and down with one casual gesture or word. Isn't that so, Maika?"

"What? Me? Uhm... Yeah, I guess so." Oh? Lady Maika blushed as she agreed with her mother.

Even though she was young, she was still a girl, after all. It seemed like she

had some romantic experience too. It was heart-warming to observe a girl of her age. Although, physically speaking, I was the same age in this world.

“Maika, could you please help me prepare the food? Ash, you can just rest. And let’s just leave those two alone and eat among us here separately.”

“With pleasure,” I agreed.

It was an honor to be treated as if I was a part of the family at the village chief’s house. While it may have just been a matter of convenience to give those two lovebirds space for themselves, it felt like a hearty welcome.

Chapter 4: Paper Is Mightier Than the Beast

As the busy fall harvest came to a close, I recalled what had happened last year around this time.

Mrs. Yuika had gathered all the children of the village for a storytelling session. She told us an epic tale about the struggles of a young boy saving people and bringing peace to a region plagued by demons. It was great entertainment—full of laughter, tears, and love.

The story had some religious undertones, such as the hero befriending a wolf, a monkey, and a dragon, which were all personifications of the three gods. In that regard, it also reminded me of a folktale from my past life, although this hero did not offer them any *kibi dango*.

In the end, it had been thanks to that story that I found new resolve to live in this world. This demonstrated how one could never be sure as to what worked as a remedy for one's life.

Wait a minute. Since I started becoming so enthusiastic after that storytelling session, could it be that I look like a child who just wants to play the hero? How embarrassing!

I suddenly shuddered and felt something warm jump off my lap. Still half asleep, I wondered what that could have been as I opened my eyes and let out a yawn.

“Wha—?”

Oh, right. After finishing today's work in the fields, I arrived early at the church and decided to take a nap before the study lesson. I must have been much more exhausted than I thought.

Slowly, I lifted up my heavy eyelids and was surprised to see Lady Maika standing right in front of me. She seemed startled too, since she took a step backward with a bright-red face.

Observing her endearing behavior, I greeted her. “Good morning.”

“M-Morning! Sorry for waking you up!”

“No, that is fine. I just took a short rest since I arrived early. I am glad you woke me up for our lesson.” I rubbed my eyes and stifled another yawn.

“I see, Maika... You’ll have to keep trying your best!” Lady Tanya was giggling behind Lady Maika.

“What do you mean by that, Tanya?”

“Nothing in particular!”

Waking up to the playful chatter of two girls was not all too bad.

“I was just curious because the cat was sitting on Ash’s lap!” Lady Maika said.

“Yeah, sure—it was the cat you were curious about,” Lady Tanya joked.

It seemed that the culprit who had woken me up by jumping off my lap was our village’s newest resident, Sir Cat. Using the earnings from the aloe ointment, Mrs. Yuika had brought him back from the city.

For a while, I had been trying to develop rat poison to protect the food in our warehouse, but all of my attempts had failed miserably. I was capable of creating poison that killed rats, but none of them worked as baits. The rats were smart enough to stay away from any lures if they felt something was off, or if they had witnessed one of their own dying from it. It seemed that their wild instincts trumped my shallow wit by a mile.

When I casually brought up my failure in a conversation with Mrs. Yuika, she told me that she had a good idea to deal with my problem. It turned out that her “good idea” was adopting a natural-born rat killer. Sir Cat—or as I called him, Ryūzōji—did not often go near people, so I could see why Lady Maika would have been curious. Maybe he considered us beneath him.

“It has been getting cold outside; he must have used me as a heater.”

Looking down, I saw some of Ryūzōji’s fur on my lap. Why couldn’t he have sat there while I was awake?

Meanwhile, Lady Tanya was tilting her head in response to my comment. “Are you sure? I think he likes you too.”

“Do you think so? I would be happy if that were the case.”

I liked the fluffiness of cats. Hopefully, he was going to let me pet him sometime in the future.

By the way, why did it seem like Lady Maika was writhing in agony while Lady Tanya was smirking to herself?

“A-Anyway, let’s get started with today’s lesson! L-Let’s not lose any more time!” Lady Maika shouted as she covered her burning-red face.

“I guess you’re right...”

Both girls were ready and sat down for their lesson.

“Ash, I have a question. I don’t understand this expression; could you explain it for me?” Lady Tanya asked right away.

Lately, she had been extremely motivated. It was not like she wasn’t engaged from the start, but at the beginning she only wanted to know about beekeeping. However, now she also wanted to properly learn how to read and write, as well as how to do math.

I was not surprised. Anyone who had seen her together with Ban knew exactly why she wanted to study. She wanted to be useful and help Ban however possible. In other words, she was eager to become a good wife. How endearing! I could not help but become a passionate supporter of their love.

At the same time, it felt strange to accompany them as an assistant on their training sessions in the woods. I did not hate it, but I felt like I was in the way. Lady Tanya had the wholehearted expression of a young girl in love, and even the otherwise silent and socially-inept hunter, Ban, was giving off the feeling that he wanted to walk while holding hands or carrying her on his back. I was completely in the way. Being the third wheel to a newlywed couple was the worst of all hells. *Well, they aren’t even officially dating yet, so calling them newlywed might be a bit misleading, but it’s not too far off.*

In the company of these two lovebirds, my face tended to make the same sour expression as it did when biting into an astringent persimmon. Incidentally, my greatest discovery this fall had been the wild persimmons inside the forest. I was already experimenting on how to dry them, and I had planted several seeds

in vacant land in the village. I also intended to investigate several other uses for persimmons, such as making them into dye or vinegar, which I seemed to remember from my past life.

It was strange that, so far, no knowledge regarding the use of persimmons had emerged in this village, even given its current developmental stage. This must have been the influence of the ancient civilization. Farming methods had developed to a point where the villagers sustained a bare minimum supply—however hungry that may have left them—with field crops alone. As such, there was no need to enter the dangerous forest and mountains to cultivate new produce.

At the same time, according to Mrs. Yuika, it seemed that dried persimmons were circulating in the city. In other words, currently, the knowledge regarding astringent persimmons was partially monopolized. Most likely, that knowledge was also part of the remnants of the ancient civilization. Although it was also possible that it had emerged from another region out of necessity.

Judging from the fact that a monetary economy had developed in this world in spite of the poor literacy rate, I assumed that there was a tendency to limit access to knowledge and technology. Keeping such information secret made it much easier to increase the wealth of a specific region.

“Ash is thinking about something difficult again.” Lady Maika staring at my face brought me back to reality.

“I am sorry. I was thinking about persimmons.”

“Oh? The ones my mom keeps going on about? I’m also looking forward to trying them!”

Apparently, Mrs. Yuika was a fan of the characteristically sweet taste of dried persimmons, and she was praying for the success of my experiment. I was hoping that the method which was already used to dry certain vegetables and wild plants could also be applied to persimmons.

“If all goes well, we will have another sweet food for our village.”

“Are you sure that fruit is going to become sweeter?” Lady Tanya showed her skepticism with a wry smile.

I guess that would be the natural reaction of anyone who had witnessed the terrible spectacle of me taking a large bite of a persimmon the moment I found it. I'll never forget the bitterness of that raw astringent persimmon. Sure, it was in the name of the fruit, but I didn't expect it to be this bad...

“Unfortunately, the botanical guide did not include any instructions on drying fruit, so I can only pray for it to turn out well,” I responded.

At the very least I hoped to get rid of the bitter taste, even if it did not turn out too sweet. Since I was going to taste-test it myself, I sincerely prayed for it to work.

While Lady Tanya looked at me with pity, Lady Maika, who had not witnessed my agony, changed subjects. “By the way, Tanya, you’ve been going into the forest, right? How is it? Is it as tough as you expected?”

“Yeah, it’s exhausting! It seems that we’ve not yet been into the deep and dangerous parts, but I’m already dead tired whenever I get back home!”

In contrast with her words, Lady Tanya looked extremely happy. I was not surprised to hear Lady Maika murmur that she envied her in response. However, I was also a bit worried; it was true that she had built up a lot of fatigue from those excursions.

“It is indeed exhausting to walk in the forest. If there is ever anything troubling you, do not hesitate to ask me, or Ban, or Maika, or Mrs. Yuika.”

“Thanks,” she said with a smile.

Although I considered it unlikely that she would have chosen me out of these people. If she wanted to talk to someone of the opposite gender, surely she would have picked Ban. And if she wanted advice from someone of the same gender, it was in the hands of the other two.

“There is actually something I wanted to ask you, unrelated to the forest...” It turned out I was wrong; she came straight to me. I wondered what it was. “Although I don’t want to bother you any more than I already have...”

“Not at all. I am not sure how much I can help you, but I will do my best. What is on your mind?”

I wanted to help her to the best of my abilities. As the future beekeeper, she was an important personnel after all. Admittedly, I was slightly worried, though, since my abilities were quite limited.

“It’s about my younger brother, Jigil.”

“What about him?”

Next to me, Lady Maika made a sour face. It was not as sour as the one I had made when eating the astringent persimmon, but it seemed that she was still hostile towards him from our last interaction.

“Lately, he’s not been talking to me. It appears that something’s troubling him, but whenever I ask him any questions, he gets angry or runs away.”

Are you sure he’s not just in his rebellious phase?

However, before I could say anything, Lady Tanya added that she was aware that his behavior was probably normal for his age. “It’s just that, you know, I’m kinda like a substitute parent to him. I think I somewhat fulfill the role of a mother, but that of a father is more difficult...”

“I understand. It must be difficult on your own.”

Even under normal circumstances, child-rearing was already a sea of worries, so I could not imagine how stressful it must have been for a 16-year-old girl raising a teenage boy. Besides, I imagined that it must have been worse recently, since Lady Tanya was busy learning about apiculture and she had not been spending a lot of time with her brother.

“I probably shouldn’t worry too much, since he still has his friends, but I haven’t seen him play much lately either. I’m worried he’s taking it all on himself...”

“I understand your concern.” In the worst case, this was going to negatively affect her work as a beekeeper and her relationship with Ban. “I will try to find out what is going on,” I said.

“Ash! Are you really okay with this?” Lady Maika whispered into my ear after I had taken responsibility.

I was not too pleased about it either, but it seemed that there was no one

else who could help Lady Tanya. And Jigil hated me already, so there was no problem if I ended up making him hate me even more.

“It is fine. For now, I will just try and talk to him.”

Lady Maika heaved a deep sigh. “You really are amazing, Ash.”

Thank you, but I haven't done anything yet?

I had given my word without much thought, but in reality I was not very good at talking to someone like Jigil.

Even if I disagreed with a person mainly driven by reason and interests, I could usually understand their point of view and use that as leverage to make them concede. However, when dealing with someone driven by their emotions, I had no way of gaining the upper hand even if we agreed.

Unfortunately, that meant that I, someone who dearly loved intellect and tranquility, had to resort to a slightly more reckless tactic. Jigil may have perceived it as a threat, but compared to his blatant display of violence from a while back, my words—which could have been considered intimidation tactics—were harmless. *Right?*

Thus, I warmly greeted Jigil, who was sitting by himself at the riverside. “It is already evening, Jigil. Should you not be at home already?”

He seemed genuinely surprised to hear my voice. Earlier, when Lady Tanya had greeted him, he had not reacted, but now he instinctively turned his head towards me.

“What do you want? Revenge?”

Or maybe he was actually more frightened than surprised. Although I did not see why he needed to be on guard—nine times out of ten he would have easily beat me in a fistfight. Not to mention that, if I really wanted to harm him, I would have taken care of it without alerting him first.

“No, I do not want revenge. I just noticed an acquaintance sitting by themselves at night without moving and checked in on them. Is that strange?”

In a village like this, where everyone knew each other, this seemed perfectly

normal. Especially considering that he was close to the river, which added the danger of drowning.

“Get lost!”

“What if *you* get lost? I saw Tanya going home earlier and she looked worried. Would it not be better if you joined her?”

“That’s none of your business!!”

It showed that he cared about his sister; he reacted quite strongly at the mention of her name.

“You are right, it is none of my business. However, Tanya’s well-being is of my concern. I could not care less about you, but I am worried about your sister.”

Jigil seemed hurt and annoyed as he bit his lower lip. I imagined he took offense that someone who he had challenged to a fight only thought of him as an extra to his sister.

Just as I had planned. For the next part, I needed him to be upset and careless.

“Lately, Tanya always looks so worried. Even when she is going to the forest with Ban.”

That was a lie. When Lady Tanya accompanied Ban to the forest, she always looked very happy. *So please, rest assured while I trick you.*

“Do you realize how dangerous that is? For Tanya to walk around with a troubled mind in a place where the slightest misstep can lead to a big injury?”

“S-She’ll get hurt?”

And so, his hostility towards me starts turning into concern for his sister. I just need to push him a little more. “Yes, it is very likely. I know we have had our differences, but I want to bury the hatchet and talk things out for the sake of your sister. You do not want your sister to get hurt, right?”

This might have sounded like a threat, implying that Lady Tanya was in danger if he did not listen to me, but I had just spoken from the bottom of my heart.

“Of course not! She’s my only family... And I cause a lot of trouble for her...”

As expected, he calmed down out of concern for his sister. Although, like any good rebellious teenager, he was still sulking. Any arguments or feuds seemed pointless in the face of a blood relative being in danger.

A drowning man will clutch at straws, and an anxious one will fall for a vicious cult!

I put on my mantle as the messiah of the swindlers and talked in my friendliest voice. “In that case, we both have the same goal! Do you want to fight together to protect Tanya from any danger?”

“I-I’ll fight!”

This was another (make-believe) holy war! You like terminology like that, don’t you? I nodded with a serious face and firmly shook his hand.

Since ancient times, the handshake had been a symbol of reconciliation and a sign of contract—we had become brothers in arms. Although Jigil seemed to be acting mostly in the heat of the moment.

“For a start, do you know what could be troubling Tanya?”

I knew it was her brother standing here in front of me, but I wondered how self-aware he was.

“Well, it’s...”

It looked like he had some self-awareness after all, as he averted his eyes in embarrassment.

“If it is a secret, I will not tell anyone. I am not even close to any of your friends, so there will not even be any occasions. How about you try telling a fellow man?”

“Do you promise? If you tell anyone, I’ll break off our pact.”

“I promise.”

I thought of promises as something that was meant to be broken, but I did not say that part out loud.

After I tricked him into believing me, he finally started talking. “Well... You probably know already, but lately, my sis and big bro Ban have been getting

along very well...”

I probably knew much better than him, but I just nodded along. He too seemed to adore Ban as a brother.

“And at this rate, they’ll probably end up getting married? Or something? I think...”

When pronouncing the word “married,” he was mumbling to a point where I could barely understand him. He must have been embarrassed—how cute.

I guessed that he was probably feeling lonely at the thought of his sister being taken away, and thus rebelled in protest. After all, she was also like a mother to him.

“Are you sad that she is going to leave?”

“No, not at all.” Jigil was shaking his head, and his face became red. It was natural to feel sad in a situation like this, but he did not want to admit it. “It’s not like that... It’s just that the reason why this didn’t happen before is... It was my fault.”

Lady Tanya was still young, but in this village, 16 was a perfectly suitable age for marriage. Especially considering that her parents had died early and she was not financially stable. Nevertheless, she did not even consider it because she had to take care of her younger brother. Lady Tanya must have been worried about what would happen to him once she left. However, Jigil seemed unaware that the biggest reason for her celibacy lay in her love interest.

“I like big bro Ban. I know he’s a good person, even though he can be scary sometimes.”

“Yes, he is not very good at communicating.”

Hearing me agree, Jigil started to smile a bit. “Yeah, it makes him seem scary. But anyway, I know I can trust him to take good care of my sis, and I want them to be together but...” Jigil’s expression stiffened and he clenched his fists. “I don’t want to be in the way! I want my sis to be happy!”

He looked very mature for his young age. He was a determined and independent person caring for others. However, he was still lacking in strength.

“But I don’t know what to do...” he continued. “I want to leave our home, but I don’t know where to go... And I can’t really talk to my sis...” His grip loosened and he hung his head in shame.

“I see. You are wondering what you could do to avoid causing your sister trouble.”

“Yeah... That sounds about right.”

Unfortunately, this had the opposite effect on Lady Tanya. It was ironic, but it made me feel relieved. The siblings were both worried about each other. Even faced with the harsh reality of living in a poor village, they managed to uphold their strong familial bond.

As a hopeless idealist who had regained his will to live from a fictional story, I wanted nothing more than to support them.

“I know what to do. It just so happens that there is a craftsman in this village who is currently looking for a disciple.”

This particular one was so desperate for help that he even told me all his secret knowledge without hesitation.

“Really?!”

“Yes, I heard it directly from him. There has been a shortage of hands in his field for a while now, but lately he has been quite busy, so now he needs all the help he can get.” *I can guarantee it to you as the main culprit for his busyness.*

Before I could even ask if he wanted to give it a shot, Jigil bowed his head. “Ash, please introduce me to this person! I’ll do any job!”

That was quite brave of him; to agree on the spot without even knowing who the craftsman was. It was the opposite of uncivilized.

“Understood. I will tell the craftsman to pay you a visit in a few days. If he accepts you as a disciple, I assume he will also tell Tanya.”

“Okay! Thanks!” When he raised his bowed head up again, there was a mixture of excitement and nervousness on his face.

I wanted to tell him that he did not need to be so nervous, but I kept quiet for now. I wondered what his reaction was going to be when the silent and

unsociable hunter showed up. I really wished I could catch a glimpse of that expression.

Several days later, after Jigil had successfully become Ban's disciple, I found myself being chased around by the former.

"Come over here! Why didn't you tell me it was big bro Ban! I didn't know what to say when he suddenly asked me!"

"You were the one who accepted before I could go into any details. If you had asked me, I would have told you!"

I could not deny that I did not tell him; he just did not ask me.

In any case, everything worked out peacefully. Jigil was going to learn hunting techniques and prepare himself to become independent, Ban would get another person after me to help him on his hunts, and Jigil could also help his sister with her beekeeping work as he became used to the forest.

Once Ban and Lady Tanya got married and moved in together, Jigil could just live in whichever place was left vacant. As both houses would become his family homes, he did not need to refrain himself. All in all, it was a great outcome with no losers.

...So, why did I have to be chased around by Jigil?

"By the way, do you want to join our study group at the church? That way you could learn about beekeeping and help your sister even more!"

"Shut up! Just let me punch you! And I don't think I would learn anything!"

"If you study hard enough, you will learn! And I would rather not get punched!"

"Please teach me then! Thanks, Ash!"

"You are welcome!"

Although I would have much preferred for him to stop running after me than receiving his thanks. While I had gained stamina from my excursions into the woods, it was still quite difficult for me to keep up with a fit older boy like Jigil.

In the end, I managed to escape by sheer force of will, as I lived by the rule to never submit myself to irrational violence.

Will I have to keep running from now on until he lands a punch on me?

Fall had passed and given way to the harshest season. While there was not enough snow to cover the landscape in white, the forest, the plains, and the fields all resembled the color of dried earth as the green had faded away. The land looked like a corpse whose blood had stopped flowing. It was no wonder that winter was called the season of death in many cultures.

Similarly, the farmers also entered a temporary state of death until the land resumed its breathing. As they could not harvest anything from the fields, they were forced to temporarily change their occupations. Some worked as artisans on the side, while others became weavers. There were also some who turned into temporary carpenters doing easy repairs around the village.

As for me, I had become a full-time researcher. As a result of the past year's efforts, I was now able to cover the expenses for my experiments in advance. This allowed for much smoother progress compared to the aloe research that I had conducted in spring. I was also grateful that I had the blessing to use all the surplus firewood.

Recently, I had been studying processing methods for materials derived from honeybees. During fall, I had collected some beehives in the forest together with Lady Tanya. I was surprised when I actually managed to make an ointment out of it. According to the book, it had antibacterial properties and, just like the aloe, it could be used as a salve to treat wounds as well as a cosmetic lotion. Currently, I was testing to see if it was possible to increase the effectiveness of both ointments by mixing them together.

In addition, I had also succeeded in making candles from the beehive, which allowed me to work longer at night. It appeared that the honeycombs were made out of beeswax, which was quite useful. But why did bees produce wax? And why was it antibacterial? I had no idea. Whenever I was studying a new subject, I came up with so many interesting questions. Alas, my knowledge was limited, and I did not know the answer. *Why couldn't I have studied biology*

more seriously in my past life?

“Ash, is the pot supposed to be boiling this much?”

Heeding my mother’s warning, I hurriedly looked up from my study materials.

“Yes, this much is just about right. Thank you for the warning.”

I checked the state of the bark inside the pot and started filtering the broth. My mother stopped sewing and watched my work with great interest.

“It’s strange that this turns into medicine,” she said.

“It is strange indeed.”

This broth was going to become medicine. I could not have told you why, even though I had conducted several experiments on its effects.

According to my reliable botanical guide, the bark that I had boiled had anti-inflammatory properties and it could be used for fever and pain relief. Judging from its shape and effects, it was most likely a variety of what I would have referred to as willow in my past life.

According to my smattering knowledge, willow had been used since ancient times and was related to the famous painkiller Aspirin. However, I did not know how willow broth and aspirin exactly operated so that they had a pain-relieving effect. *Why couldn’t I have studied chemistry more seriously in my past life?*

I let out a sigh while pouring the willow broth into a porcelain jar that had been disinfected with boiling water.

“Are you worried about Maika?”

“Am I worried? Yes, I guess I am.”

“You care a lot about her.”

I could not bring myself to reply to my happily-smiling mother that my scientific spirit of inquiry was probably a bigger driving factor. But it was still true that I worried about Lady Maika, who had come down with a cold.

In this world, people were still dying left and right from the common cold. I cursed my past-life memories of nanotechnology-based medicine which could have prevented many funerals.

However, this year was going to be different. For the further development of the village, it was vital to maintain and grow the population; I needed to protect the villagers from illness for the sake of my dreams too. On top of that, Lady Maika was not only intelligent and came from a good lineage, but she also was always friendly towards me. It made sense to work my hardest for her well-being both objectively and subjectively.

I packed up the cold medicine and prepared to go out. “I will go to the village chief’s house now. I will see you later, mother!”

“Take care, and say hello to the chief for me!”

After being sent off by my mother, I left the house. My father had been out of the house. He was currently at a gathering with all the useless men of this village getting in the holiday spirit. By drinking spirits.

When I arrived at the village chief’s house, Mrs. Yuika greeted me. She looked a bit tired, since she had been constantly nursing her daughter. Her husband was fulfilling the duties of village chief in her stead—he was the opposite of my father.

“Here is some more medicine. As always, take care not to drink too much at once.”

“Your medicine has really been a godsend. After taking it, she always feels a bit better and regains some appetite.”

“I am glad to hear that. Unfortunately, I cannot cure her myself, so she has to take in plenty of nutrients to fight off the disease.”

Mrs. Yuika nodded.

In this world, no one believed that illness was a divine punishment or due to evil spirits and demons. Or at the very least, no one thought that they could exorcise the disease by merely doing penance. They did not perform any reckless phlebotomies either. The general advice was to get plenty of nutrients, stay clean, and rest as much as possible.

Most likely, this common sense, similar to what I remembered from my past life, was another remnant of the ancient civilization. If only more advanced tools and facilities remained, there may have also been better medical

technology, such as antibiotics, vaccines, and anesthesia. Unfortunately, they did not exist, and thus even a common cold easily led to death.

Regardless, Mrs. Yuika kept a positive attitude. “Every winter we expect several people to die, but this year might be the first one where everyone survives.”

“I will do my best. Ban and Jigil have also been hard at work.”

This winter we had plenty of food and cold medicine. Thanks to Sir Cat, there were hardly any rats ravaging the warehouse. In addition, there was a greater reserve of hunting meat and vegetables from the forest thanks to Ban no longer being on his own. Finally, the profits from the aloe ointment guaranteed financial safety too.

Mrs. Yuika had collected all the surplus goods at her house and provided them to the sick residents as needed. For example, she was giving out water mixed with honey and salt, chicken soup, meatball broth, and slightly-bitter dried persimmons. Fortunately, my cold medicine allowed the patients to regain their appetite, so they could take in plenty of nutrients from these supplies.

It did not sound like much, but it was effective. So far, not a single villager had become emaciated and suffered because they could not get any food down. I firmly hoped that we could maintain this situation at any cost until spring.

“Do you want to see Maika?”

“Yes, if it is not troubling her. She must be bored from staying in bed all day.”

“Please go ahead, she also wants to see you. You can take this water I was just about to bring her.”

I took the mug filled with water and poked my head in the room where Lady Maika was recovering.

“Do you mind if I come in?”

“Oh, Ash. Please come in.” She sat up and desperately tried fixing her bed hair.

“Are you sure you can sit up?”

“Yeah, it’s fine. I had a really bad fever, but thanks to your medicine it’s gone away.”

“I am glad you are feeling better already. This is from your mother.”

“Thanks, Ash.”

I handed her the water mixed with salt and honey. This was an oral rehydration solution based on a recipe that I had shared with Mrs. Yuika.

When catching a cold, there was always danger of dehydration because the activity of the immune system often led to fever, which in turn prompted the body to cool itself off via excessive sweating. I attempted to break that vicious cycle with this drink.

The well water in this village was relatively safe to drink, but it was still risky. Especially for an already weakened, sick person, it was highly likely to cause diarrhea, which would have just further exacerbated the dehydration.

We had decided to make the solution in large batches at the village chief’s house, as it required a lot of firewood to properly boil and disinfect the water, and we did not want to burden the individual households. I had also tried mixing in salt and honey.

“I like this drink; it tastes good.”

“I am glad to hear that.”

A warm smile came over Lady Maika’s slightly-flushed face—it looked like she had come straight out of an advert.

The salt honey water was a necessity for the patients, but it was also quite tasty. I was glad to see that it lightened their mood in their painful fight against their illness. Sickness and health started with the mind after all.

Lady Maika happily placed her lips on the mug and drank it all up at once.
“Thanks, that was refreshing!”



“You are welcome. Do you want to lie down again?” I asked her as I took back the mug.

“I’m fine! Thanks to your medicine I’m feeling much better!” She smiled.

“Are you sure? Your face is still red; you might still have a slight fever.”

“No, I’m not hot at all. I’m fine, really. Can you stay a little longer?”

It seemed that she was bored. Considering she had spent the past six days in her bed, I could fully understand her, but I also had to fulfill my duty as a nurse.

“I cannot just let you decide that on your own. Let me see if you have a fever.”

“...What are you doing?!”

I put my hand on her reddish forehead. Maybe it was inappropriate to suddenly check a girl’s temperature like this, but I only thought of it as a standard medical procedure. As expected, it was still hot.

“See? It is still a bit hot. Lie down and get some more rest.” I grabbed her shoulders and tucked her in.

“A-Ash... wait...”

“Your face is very red; it looks like you are still not well. You should sleep.”

“Y-Yes.”

As I adjusted the bedcovers, she stopped protesting and obeyed. She was a much more reasonable child than I had ever been in my past life. I keenly realized our difference in upbringing.

“Are you going to leave already?”

“Well...”

She buried her face in the bed covers and gave me a sad look. Being ill was boring, and she must have longed for some company. Besides, Mrs. Yuika looked exhausted from nursing her, so maybe it was for the best if I stayed for a while and let her have some rest too.

“If you want, I can stay and talk with you for a bit. I have made some progress

with my research on beehives.”

“Really? What have you been doing?”

“For now, I have managed to make some ointment and candles. I want to see what happens if I mix the former with aloe.”

“You have already made it? You really are amazing, Ash.”

“No, it is only thanks to the wisdom of our ancestors.” I could not have done it without Lady Tanya’s book, which included information on the manufacturing processes. “In the near future, I want you to be a test subject again for the ointment. Can I count you in?”

“Yes! I can start right away!”

“I am afraid you will have to wait. I first need to test it on myself to see if there are any side effects. I want to make sure it is as safe as possible before giving it to others.”

I was especially hesitant about giving it to women without testing it first, since it was a product for the skin. Culturally, a lot of value was placed on a woman’s appearance in this world. Men, on the other hand, did not have to pay as much attention to their looks, so it felt more appropriate for me to be the first test subject.

“Oh, okay. Have you been using it already?”

“Yes, I have been rubbing it on my left hand. So far it seems to work fine. Can you see how smooth it is?”

As I stretched out both hands, Lady Maika reservedly grasped them.

“Your hands... Yeah, the left one is very smooth.”

“With this, your hands will end up looking even prettier again. So please take care of yourself, so you can become a test subject again.”

“Yes! I will do my best to recover as soon as possible!”

Her enthusiastic reply showed that she already had a strong interest in beauty despite her young age.

Similar to the aloe ointment, I anticipated that the honeybee product was also

going to be valued mostly as a beauty product rather than a salve for wounds. It was to be expected considering it was still a luxury item, but I felt that in any world there was a tendency for new inventions to unintentionally cater to unexpected demands.

After talking to Lady Maika for a while, I also checked on the other sick people to see if any of them were in critical condition. I wanted to welcome the next spring with everyone and increase our productivity for the new work year.

With a bright outlook on the future, I returned to my frugal home, only to find my father being annoyingly drunk.

“Ajj!! Come seet hiir!!” He did not just slur his words, but it seemed like he was speaking a completely different language.

While I could not understand a word, I realized from his movements and having to deal with him on a daily basis that he wanted me to sit down in front of him. I felt a bit sad to be reminded that I had such a good-for-nothing as my father.

“Yuu olways riid dose bu-uks. But a rial man wahks in da fieldsss!!”

“Yes, fieldwork is a man’s work. But has your work not become a little easier with the knowledge from my books?” I just ignored my father’s usual lecture—or rather grumbling—which I had heard countless times before.

While I had not yet experimented with pesticides, I had divided the fields into smaller blocks and managed manual labor such as cultivation and tending of the land. I had checked the development and wrote down the yields of the harvest. As there were no previous records, it was not possible to make a direct comparison, but it felt like productivity had increased.

“Nansensss! Ye need haad wahk en taim... fo gutt riisa...”

“Yes, you need hard work and time for good results, but my management is also hard work. I cannot create my notes without thoroughly inspecting the crops and the fields. And I am not going against the teachings of our ancestors.” I did not agree that just aimlessly working in the fields counted as hard work and time well spent.

I poured some well water in a mug and gave it to my father. I also made use of the occasion to mix in some dried herb powder. According to my guide, it could be used as a tranquilizer, so I wanted to conduct a little experiment. I did not know if it was safe to mix with alcohol, though. I got a bit excited when I saw my father gulp it down at once.

“We-Whyy ahr uu soo smaht?”

“Why am I smart?”

Because I have memories from my past life. It would have been much easier if I were able to tell the truth, but I kept silent to avoid any possible trouble.

“Aah yuu rilly mai son?” My father looked at me with puppy dog eyes.

Was he one of those men who were in constant doubt of their fatherhood because there was no way of knowing for sure? Especially since they weren’t the ones who had experienced pregnancy and childbirth themselves?

It was true that I had another pair of parents outside of this world. And I could not deny that I considered the ones in this world as a more foreign existence than those who had come first in my past life. However, there was no mistaking that I was related to my father David.

I let out a sigh. “What are you talking about? No matter how you look at it, I am your son.”

Of course, that was only my opinion, but it was based on evidence.

Number one, my mother was an extremely virtuous and chaste woman with a sense of duty who would have never cheated.

Number two, you could tell that I had my father’s genes from the outside. While our speech pattern and behaviors might have been worlds apart, our eyes and the shape of our ears were the same.

Number three, well this one was not actually about being related by blood...

“Do you really think I could understand your slurred drunken language if I was not your son?”

“Rilly?”

“Yes. I have grown looking at your back, after all. Although it does not look very gracious when you are drunk.”

Admittedly, his drunkenness had taught me valuable lessons about which paths I had to avoid.

“I ssee... I see.”

My father fell flat on the table and started weeping.

One of his no-good drinking buddies must have teased him saying something like, “Is he really your son?”

You don't have to worry about that, I'm just special.

I started worrying about the effects of my tranquilizer; he should not have been this energetic still. As I was pondering whether the dose had been too low, my father started snoring loudly.

“Hmm... I wonder if this was the alcohol knocking him out or my tranquilizer working.”

My experiment had failed; I had learned my lesson. It was preferable not to mix it with alcohol. But I was probably going to do it again. I hated drunkards, so it was tempting to conduct dangerous experiments on them.

Seeing that I had inherited quite a sturdy body myself from my father, I was fairly certain that a little bit of fun was not going to kill him at least.

And thus, spring had arrived. Green blood started flowing again through the veins of the land. The wheat that had survived winter stretched itself towards the high noon sun and welcomed the farmers back to the fields. However, before the harvest could officially start, it was time for the spring festival.

In my opinion, the main purpose of the festival was to restore everyone's spirits by using up the food reserves which had reached their preservation date limit. This year's festival seemed remarkably more lavish than previous years', since the warehouse was still full of food, even though a lot had been distributed to sick people over the winter.

One reason for this was the fact that there had not been a single funeral this

winter. It was custom to hold a party in honor of the deceased person and to comfort the family members left behind. Luckily, this year everyone had survived, though. I could see why the villagers were all in such good spirits; even the more serious people let loose during the festival.

Everyone used the savings from their side jobs to stock up on alcohol. And of course, my father, who had been drinking all winter, ran towards the alcohol as if he had not seen a bottle in ages. Well, not quite. That was what I would have said any other year, but this year was different.

“How come you are not drinking much?”

“Hmpf... I ain’t young anymore. As your father, I need to be more sens’ble.”

“You are a great father. I am proud of you.”

He snorted and faced away, but I saw his ears blush.

“I support your decision to cut down on the drinking. You will be healthier, which means you can do a better job in the fields, and in turn, be a better man.”

“Ya think? Lately, I’ve been wakin’ up more refreshed.”

The reduced stress on the liver must have improved his health already, leaving him with more strength for his work too.

“I am still weak, so I am glad to have someone as reliable as you with me.”

“Leave it to me! I ain’t gonna lose to ya yet!” He was laughing from his belly. Flattering him was indeed quite easy.

I hoped this would spur him on to work even harder. I imagined my mother was such a good wife to him because she had fallen for his simple and naive personality. Actually, I was almost certain, because she had given me the advice to “manipulate him in the right direction.”

My father, who only had a few drinks, decided to go back home with my mother. They were a good match for each other. However, that meant that it was probably a good idea to stay away from my house for a while.

As I waited, I greeted Ban and his not-yet-official family in the hope of securing smoked meat.

“Hey, Ash!”

“Ash? Today is nice weather, isn’t it?”

Jigil and Lady Tanya greeted me back. While he did not say anything, it seemed that Ban had noticed me approaching before the other two. This showed once again his experience as a seasoned hunter.

“Hello. I have come to greet you and your delicious meat.”

As I smiled, Jigil held out a warm skewer of smoked meat. “I knew you’d come, so I put one aside for you.”

“Thank you! I will repay this debt.” I promptly started cleaning the meat off the skewer. There was nothing better than protein for someone still growing. “This is delicious. I am in heaven...”

“In moments like these, you seem like a normal child.” Lady Tanya laughed heartily.

She sat next to Ban with their shoulders touching. I was glad that they were getting along so well, but I had heard that they were still not dating. And my source was Jigil, so it must have been true. He asked me if that was really what couples looked like, but all I could reply was that it depended on the people involved. And that was true for this world as much as it was for my previous one.

“Ban, what does the forest look like? Foraging season is approaching,” I asked while chewing my delicious meat.

“Busier than usual.” Ban scratched his head with a slight look of concern on his face.

I was not sure what he meant by that, but... “That does not sound good. Having dangers lurking in the forest while working is a nuisance, especially in regard to the beekeeping.”

“Yeah, I’m worried about the beekeeping, but more than anything, I’m worried about Ban and Jigil.” Lady Tanya looked anxious as she considered that her whole family was working in the forest.

Seeing this, Jigil, who looked more mature these days, spoke in a bright tone.

“We are going to be fine, sis. Right, big bro?”

Ban simply nodded in agreement to his apprentice’s words.

I decided to help them too; there was no point in just worrying. “Ban is always very thorough and never lets his guard down. And with Jigil as a backup, I am sure they will be fine.”

I knew the silent hunter’s precautions all too well. If he felt like even the slightest thing was off, he observed the situation for several hours, and when faced with something unfamiliar, he preferred to retreat. Considering he was facing off wild animals, I do not think it would have been too far fetched to say his instincts were on par with theirs.

“I also believe in them,” Lady Tanya murmured.

Being able to trust them while at the same time being worried was human nature. I understood why Lady Tanya could not bring herself to fully smile. No matter how advanced a society was, protection charms never went out of fashion.

“You will have to take extra care to put Tanya at ease. If you need any help, please call me. I am also a bit worried to hear that the forest is busy. Besides, I need to gather some spring plants and vegetables.”

“Just make sure you don’t hold us back, Ash!” Jigil provocatively slapped my shoulder.

“For now, I think I am still better at navigating the forest, though,” I sheepishly replied, realizing that by summer this was probably not going to be the case anymore.

I was currently a farmer, hunter apprentice, pharmacist, linguist, productivity researcher... Anyway, I was trying my hand at so many things that interested me that I was not going to outclass someone like Jigil, who focused on becoming a hunter.

On top of that, in his newfound enthusiasm, my father had taken over Lady Tanya’s field, as she was prone to being absent due to her work as a beekeeper. Therefore, I had to take care of yet another field, increasing my work as a farmer. However, I was looking forward to it—I had been told that I was

allowed to conduct some simple experiments on the fields.

I laughed from the bottom of my heart. “Hahaha... This year I am going to be busy.”

The Ban family members looked at each other before the silent hunter spoke. “In moderation.”

Why is this family so anxious?

After the spring festival, the villagers mostly returned to being serious farmers who spend their days in the fields. One of the exceptions being the two hunters and the beekeeper who worked happily alongside each other in the forest. Another exception was me—I conducted an experiment on companion plants in the field that Lady Tanya had entrusted me.

Companion plants brought about benefits when you planted them with the crops or near the fields. For example, you could use plants that contained an ingredient that repelled pests to protect the crops. According to my botanical guide, one of the flowers growing near the fields had such a repelling effect.

In the village, these flowers had been known as “the guardian deity of the fields,” which had received a magical blessing from the monkey god, the god of wisdom. Therefore, the farmers knew that the flowers had a positive effect, but they had not made proper use of them. This was probably yet another example of knowledge from the ancient civilization being turned into folklore.

While thinking about reporting this discovery to Father Folke, I planted the flowers into different sections.

“Ash, is this okay?”

“Yes, that is perfect.”

Next to me, Lady Maika, who had come to help, was sweating profusely. She did a great job as she carefully prepared the soil exactly like I had noted it down in the instructions. One of the problems of this village was the fact that many people were incapable of doing work like this.

“Thank you for helping.”

“Don’t worry about it. You helped me when I was sick, so I’ll help you however I can!” She nodded with an energetic smile. “Besides, my mom told me I should help you too.”

“Is that so? Thank you for helping me out so much.”

“But you’ve done so much more!”

“Not at all! I am only doing what I want for myself. And I could not have done it by myself.”

I realized that the whole village had benefited from my activities. However, it also had to be said that I did all of it out of selfish reasons to fulfill my own dreams. I worked hard, I produced results, and everyone thanked me for it. While our interests may have aligned, the people who helped did not do it solely for me. That was why I had to be grateful. Otherwise, I was going to end up conceited, stumbling, and falling on my own. As I had once told Mrs. Yuika, I was no saint. Regardless, it appeared that pretending to be one was effective.

I re-evaluated my actions as I kept planting the flowers. Next to me, Lady Maika had stopped working and stared at me.

“Maika?”

“Ah, yes! Uhm... I-I was just... You really are amazing!” She praised me with watery eyes. Did she get some dust in her eyes? “I’ll do my best to catch up to you!”

“I am honored you would say that. But that means I will also have to try harder to become an appropriate goal for you.” Inspired by Lady Maika’s ambition, I smiled back at her. There was nothing more pleasant than friends mutually encouraging each other.

As we prepared the soil while engaging in light-hearted talk, a shrill metallic sound rang through the village. Lady Maika’s expression suddenly changed.

“Just now... That was...”

“The emergency bell.”

It was the sound of our village’s emergency bell, which was in place to alert us of fires and attacks from wild animals and bandits. There was also the

occasional child who rang it as a joke, but none of them did it a second time after receiving a severe scolding.

At the sound of the bell, the villagers rushed out of their houses and left the fields to hurry towards the church, which was the designated gathering point. On the way, people were letting each other know what had happened.

“What happened this time? I hope it’s not bandits. That’d be bad with the chief gone and all...”

“No, it appears to be a bear attack.”

“A bear? Has someone been attacked?”

“No, it seems everything’s fine. The children who were out foraging saw it from afar and came back in a panic.”

The villagers seemed relieved that the situation was not too serious, but there was no time for optimism either. While it was not the worst situation, it was still bad.

“It looks like it is a bear... Maika, please go to the church. I will stop by my house first.”

“What? No! I’ll go with you!”

“I am afraid I cannot let you come. I need you to go to the church and let everyone know that I will arrive after making some arrangements at my house. Otherwise, they might end up throwing a funeral again if they think I have gone missing like last year.”

I said it as a joke to lighten the mood, but it seemed to have the opposite effect. Lady Maika looked like she was about to cry.

“I am sorry, that was a joke. But I do need to go to my house to get the spear and bow and poison that I use for hunting. I want to be prepared before going to the church.”

Unfortunately, Ban and Jigil had left for the forest only recently. At the earliest, they were going to come back the day after tomorrow if they managed to catch a prey right away. As a result, I was the only one left in the village who knew how to handle hunting equipment.

“It is going to be fine. I am Ban’s best disciple after all; he has taught me how to deal with bears.”

“Yeah, but...”

“You go join the others and make sure they stay quiet. If we do not agitate the bear, it will probably just scavenge the warehouse for food and go back. You have an important job to fulfill.”

The villagers were most likely aware of this already, as bears and boars had appeared in the past. In fact, everyone was relatively quiet on their way to the church—my comment was meant to convince Lady Maika.

If I ran into the bear, I was confident I could take care of it, and if I could not... Well, then that was it. Either way, I did not want to involve the village chief’s precious daughter.

I tried giving a final push to Lady Maika, who still looked as if she wanted to tag along, by speaking in a more commanding tone. “Listen closely, I need you to inform everyone at the church. That is your duty!”

“And you will come right away?”

“Of course. Who else is going to protect you?” I once again tried to put her at ease, but this time I went for a more pompous line, rather than a joke.

Apparently, it worked—Lady Maika blushed and agreed to get to safety.

Personally, I thought it was embarrassing, but to a girl like her, it might have sounded cool. *I guess ultimately it depends on the person, but I’m glad I passed the test this time.*

“I am leaving then.”

“You have to promise to come back! Take care!”

I agreed by waving my hand while running off.

When I rushed into my house, I discovered that the stove had already been extinguished. It appeared that my parents had already evacuated. I needed to join them as fast as possible.

In a hurry, I took out a small bottle filled with poison and added a little water.

Ban had given me this poison, which he used to hunt with. It was stored as dried powder, and you had to mix in water before using it. While it could be used as a powder too, it lacked the necessary adhesive power to apply it to the spear.

I checked the poison's viscosity and grabbed two spears and a bow before running back out again.

If the bear only wanted food, I probably would not have to use my weapons. Mostly, I kept them for protection in case it reached the church and started attacking people. Since I had no experience fighting bears, I wanted to avoid an active fight without Ban's assistance. Still, if worse came to worst, I was prepared to take up arms.

As the church appeared in the distance, I came across a large black figure. I had hunted boars before. I had stared down snakes. I had even dealt with wolves. And all of them had been formidable enemies that made me fear for my life... However, chills ran down my spine when I realized that none of them had been as threatening as the giant wild bear slowly walking towards the church before my eyes. Its mere appearance gave off a terrifying sense of intimidation. Moreover, it was heading straight for the church filled with people.

Bears were omnivores—they ate plants as well as other animals. While they only rarely ate people, it was said that, once they tasted the flesh of a human, that was all they were going to eat.

It seemed to me that this particular bear, drooling from its huge mouth, had just woken up from hibernation and was prioritizing food. As it noticed me and turned to look at me, this impression only grew stronger. His hunger had turned into a primal bloodlust, and the only thing it was thinking about was food.

I regretted not preparing the strings for the bow at home. It did not look like I was going to have any time for that right now, so I gave up on it. I threw the bow away to the ground and planted one of the spears in front of me. While stealthily covering the other spear in poison, I greeted my enemy, which was glaring at me.

“Welcome to the village, Sir Bear. What can I do for you?”

My friendly greeting was answered with a ferocious roar. It might have been intended as a nice reply on its part, but unfortunately, I did not speak bear language, so it just sounded like a frightening threat to me.

“Let us calm down a bit. If you are just hungry, I am not your enemy. I am willing to let you have some of our reserve food.”

The bear looked around to check its surroundings. It appeared as if it was scouting the area for other hunters.

“Does that not sound good? You can fill up your belly and then go back to the forest. That way both of us would be happy.”

After seemingly confirming that I was the only person around, the bear stood up and let out another threatening roar. It rang so loud that my ears hurt—my entire body vibrated from head to toe. My heart froze. It was frightening. However, threats did not work on me; I had become resilient after knowing fears far worse than this.

“It looks like you do not want to just quietly go back home. Well, I am not going to sit back and let this village get destroyed either.”

This was *my* village. That may have been an exaggeration, but it felt like mine. Ever since literature had resuscitated my hope, I had embarked on a journey to transform this village into the place of my dreams by interweaving the will and the knowledge from all sorts of books. At present, my ideal village was still far, far away. If this were a book, my story so far would have only filled the first couple of pages. This was the epic tale of my village.

“Sir Bear, I am warning you.” A murderous impulse was shooting from my brain and through my spine, filling up my whole body. “If you attack my village, then I will kill you!”

The bear started charging at me, as if it had sensed my intention to kill. Before I had any time to marvel at the giant’s incredible speed, its rough arm came striking down. I managed to reflexively evade it by throwing myself forward under its right arm. If I went backwards, I would have only ended up being killed; it would have run over me.

I was fine. Even when faced with a murderous wild bear, I kept a cool head.

The bear noticed that I had moved to the side and stopped its charge. As it changed direction on its four legs, I quickly readied the poisoned spear and rushed to its flank. After running as fast as I could, I thrust the spear at the turning bear and pierced its right arm. The beast let out yet another roar—not in menace, but in pain.

As its body kept moving in my direction, the spearhead broke off, shaking me in the process. I was left stumbling a few steps forward and found myself wide open in front of the bear. At the same time as its left arm came down upon me, I swiftly took up a defensive position, shielding myself with the broken spear's shaft.

Everything that followed went so fast that I did not fully realize what happened. All I knew was that the shaft had been smashed and that I had been blown away. There was a shivering coldness in my right upper arm. It seemed that my shield was not able to resist the attack. As a result, my small body had been sent flying through the air. The coldness in my upper arm must have been due to direct nerve damage from the bear's claws ripping open my flesh.

The bear twisted around in an attempt to get rid of the spearhead, which must have been painful. I saw that as my chance to tear off the ripped sleeve and use it as a makeshift bandage. I wrapped the cloth around my right arm so that the knot came under my armpit. Supposedly, applying pressure to the thick veins in the armpit was an excellent way of stopping the bleeding in that area. I was about to find out how true that was. *If I survive, I'll have to write it down in my experiment journal.*

"Are you ready to go again?"

Almost at the same time, the bear readied itself to fight. Unlike me, it had not given itself any first aid, of course. It had trouble walking, since the spearhead was still sticking out of its now-powerless right arm.

Apparently, the poison had started to have its effect. Nonetheless, it was going to take some time until the proud, giant bear fell. According to Ban, who had conducted extensive experiments with the poison, it took on average three minutes for it to fully work. This meant that I had to hold out for at least two more minutes. I was probably not going to last much longer anyway due to my

bleeding. Even now, my feet felt as if they had turned into jelly.

“It looks like we both can no longer use our right arm, and we are running out of time. I do not suppose you want to declare it a draw?”

While a retreat would have probably increased my chances of survival, the bear had nothing to gain from it. By the time it reached the forest, it would be dead. I wondered if the beast was aware of this. Either way, it did not show any signs of retreat.

The giant bear came running towards me. In response, I acted quickly yet carefully in accordance with my plan. I threw the remains of the spear that I was still holding in my left hand at the bear’s face to create a diversion, which I used to sprint towards the second spear. As soon as I readied the spear and turned around to face my opponent, its giant figure once again charged at me.

I won’t run away this time. I planted the butt end of the spear in the ground and directed its head at the charging bear.

This is what the pikemen must have felt like when waiting for the enemy cavalry to attack. My only weapon against this ground-shakingly heavy beast was a mere stick. *I’ll admit I’m scared.*

Even if my opponent ran straight into the spear, its momentum would likely make the giant beast fall on top of me, leading to a possibly fatal injury. Anyone would have been scared at the prospects of such a disadvantageous gamble. Even the bear must have also been scared—he was storming towards a sharp blade capable of killing him. In other words, it was a test of courage. The fear of waiting for death while it charged at you versus the fear of running towards it.

I steadied the spear with both my arms, even though the right one was close to useless. For the rest of the strength necessary, I was going to borrow the force of the ground to pierce the heavy beast. My heart was racing, and my breathing became heavy as my body started consuming more oxygen due to my nervousness. Still, my hands were not shaking. While I was on the verge of death, with the Grim Reaper approaching me head-on, I had experienced much worse.

Brave Sir Bear, living in the wild, you might’ve suffered from a serious injury. You might’ve even stared death in the face before. But I bet you’ve never

experienced death.

Back then, I had felt my last heartbeat. My lungs stopped working as I took my last few breaths. The world was fading in front of my eyes. For the first time, I heard the pure sound of the wind, free from the background noise of my inner organs. One by one, my conscious thoughts disappeared. Anyone who had experienced death was bound to become fearless. The same terror that had accompanied me in my last moments had now become a shield against my fear of death. This gave me an enormous advantage over the bear, and it ended up being the deciding factor between life and death.

As the beast was one step away from crashing into me, it stood up on his hind legs, exposing its giant body.

“Looks like you lost to your fear!”

In the last moment, the bear had given in to its fears and slowed down to evade the spearhead by taking a turn. However, it was not able to stop the momentum of its giant body weighing close to one metric ton, and thus fell onto the spear. All I had to do was point it directly towards its heart.

After the impact, I felt the raw sensation of piercing through a thick layer, followed by a gentle pulse. The bear brushed against my body as it sank to the ground together with the spear, which had broken. The beast managed to complete its intended right turn with the help of the spear... After it was too late.

I was the one who survived. Now I just had to make sure I stayed alive. The wound on my right arm was deep. While the bleeding had slowed down, it did not stop. I had lost a lot of blood already, and the wound was festering. I needed treatment and medical procedures to prevent an infection.

Before I realized it, I was sitting down on my knees. *This is bad—I’m about to lose consciousness. I need to stay awake.*

I felt like there was someone nearby, but I could not see properly; my eyelids were too heavy to lift. This injury was not something I could treat on my own. I needed help.

“Please do not take off my bandage until the bleeding stops.” In this world, it

was not possible to have a blood transfusion, so I had to make sure not to lose any more.

“And please use the ointments... the medicine at my home to treat the wound.” Both the aloe and beeswax helped reduce and prevent infections.

“If possible, please stitch the wound. Once it looks like the bleeding has stopped, do not wrap the bandage too tightly.” If the blood flow stopped completely, the wound was not going to heal.

Was I forgetting something?

“Oh, and I poisoned the bear. So, if you want to eat it, you have to cook it thoroughly.”

Wait. That was irrelevant.

I mean, it was important, but my body’s wellbeing was more vital right now.

I hoped they would take the bear meat. I wanted to eat some once I got over my injuries. I wanted to survive and eat the bear that brought me close to death. I was going to live for you, Sir Bear. There was no way I was going to die here. There were so many things I still needed to do.

I will live.

On a nice spring day, the warm sun rays tickled me awake. I was still half asleep and felt exhausted. As a wise poet once said, *‘In spring one sleeps a sleep that knows no dawn.’* At least that is how I remembered it from my past life. I wanted to lie in, but that went against my duties as a resident of this impoverished village. Besides, there were so many things I needed to do in this world.

Filled with hopes and dreams, I shook off my fatigue and opened my eyes.

“Ah, I feel rested!”

While rubbing my eyes with my left hand, I tried propping myself up with my right arm only to find myself in excruciating pain.

“Ouch! That hurt!” *I’m ashamed to say I even cried a little bit.*

As I took out my right arm from under the bedcover to look at the source of the pain, I saw that it was wrapped up in bandages.

“What happened?”

I tried remembering if I had gone to bed like this, but my memory from last night was gone, and I did not even know how much time I had slept. Even though the sharp pain had fully woken me up, I was feeling heavy-headed and absentminded. No matter how I looked at it, this was not a regular morning.

“How did I end up here?”

I realized that I was not at my house. The bed was much cleaner and more comfortable than mine had ever been.

“I feel like I have been here before... When was that? ...Oh, right!”

I remembered this room from visiting Lady Maika when she was ill. This was the bedroom of the village chief’s daughter. However, I still did not know why I was sleeping here.

As I was thinking with my drowsy head, the door opened. Lady Maika and my mother entered holding aloe ointment and bandages, as well as a tray with wheat porridge. It appeared that the latter was made with chicken-based soup stock—it emitted an appetizing smell.

Embarrassingly, my stomach growled, so I got straight to the point. “Good morning. I have a lot of questions, but most of all, I am hungry.” *Can I please have the porridge now?*

In response, they both hugged me while crying.

This felt like a déjà vu. It was the same reaction as last year, when I had gone missing. Had I been pronounced dead a second time? *Do all reincarnated people die twice? Well, I suppose that at the very least they die once in their previous life and once in their new one.* For some reason, I could not form a logical thought.

After they had finished crying, both women explained to me what had happened.

“Ah, yes! I remember. There was a bear.” As I was eating the porridge, my

senses came back to me. The chicken soup was delicious.

Apparently, after my fight with Sir Bear, I fainted from losing too much blood and stayed unconscious after developing a fever from my infected wound. According to Lady Maika, who was now wiping away her tears, I had still been responsive and even spoke a few words, but I was only half-conscious.

Thanks to both of them, I was able to remember everything up until the moment I defeated the bear, but I had no memories of the time I was out with a fever. Hopefully I had not suffered any brain damage. I needed to check my cognitive abilities once I was able to move again.

"Mother, Maika, I am sorry for causing you trouble. Thank you for rescuing me." As I bowed, my mother put her hands on mine and started crying again. I felt bad for making her worry so much.

"Y-You need to stop being so reckless!!" Lady Maika got angry while heaving with sobs. Faced with her concern for me, I could not help but feel ashamed.

"I will try my best," I replied earnestly.

"Don't just try!" They both opened their eyes wide and shouted in unison.

"Well, but depending on the situation, I might have to..."

"No! That's irrelevant!"

"Yes! You're not sorry at all!"

I am sorry.

I was reflecting on my actions, but I did not see how I could have stopped Sir Bear without risking my life. Just looking at the beast's eyes, I knew that it lusted for human flesh. What if I came across another situation like this?

Before I could even try to explain myself, Lady Maika continued scolding me. "Just look at you! You show no signs of remorse! At all!"

"I promise I regret it, but the situation called for..."

"Ash! Don't make any excuses!" My mother joined in too.

Wait a minute. Hear me out!

At that moment, Mrs. Yuika peaked in through the door.

Please help me!

These two must have been stressed from nursing me, so I hoped for a third, calmer voice to diffuse the situation... but she just averted her eyes and ran away.

“Don’t look away when I’m scolding you!”

“This is already the second time now! I won’t let you get away this easy!”

It seemed that I had no choice but to obediently listen to them. I resolved myself to take in their fierce attack in the same way that I had faced Sir Bear.



Maika's Perspective

My mom was right. I firmly promised that I'd protect Ash.

After scolding him together with Mrs. Sheba, he still showed no signs of regret. If he ever found himself in a similar situation, he would surely risk his life again. *How heroic! ...I mean, how reckless!*

Of course, I realized that he didn't really have another choice back then. And thanks to Ash, no one else got hurt and all our food was safe. In the end, everything was fine. But not for me. *I'll end up dying from worry if he keeps doing things like this.*

Naturally, I didn't want to die yet. I hadn't even told Ash that I liked him. Also, I wanted him to say it back, so I had to protect him for my sake too.

"That's why I will protect Ash!"

My mom nodded firmly in agreement. "It's great that you're saying this yourself now." She looked at the wooden sword in my hand before continuing. "But do you remember what I told you? Protecting Ash doesn't mean fighting his enemies with a sword!"

"Yeah, I remember," I replied while tightly gripping my practice sword. "But this time around the danger was an enemy that needed to be cut down!"

If only I'd practiced my sword skills more, I could've accompanied Ash and fought together with him. If I'd been as strong as my dad, I could've prevented his injury.

"As I said, I will protect Ash!"

"Wait, calm down, Maika! That might have been the case this time, but that's not what I was trying to say!"

"It's okay, Mom. I'll protect him just like you said."

"No, that's not what I meant..."

My mom was about to cry. I had never seen her like this before, but I didn't really care at the moment. I had to become stronger. I had to practice with my

sword to protect Ash.

“Listen, Maika. I want you to take care of Ash’s personal relationships.”

“I’ll do that later! First I have to protect him with my sword!”

Since Ash was so smart, it was going to take a long while before I could be of any use in that regard. In the short term, sword fighting was more helpful than studying. I was taller than him, and I’d been practicing with my dad before. However, I needed to become much, much stronger than Ash. If I were just decent at it, he’d be too kind to rely on me. Luckily, my dad was apparently the best swordsman in the country, and while I didn’t know how true that was, he was a great teacher.

Just wait, Ash! Next time I’ll protect you!

“Maika! Please listen to me! You can still practice with your sword, but it’s more important that you learn about social etiquette in the city!”

Don’t get in my way, Mom!

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Even after I had woken up, I was strictly ordered not to leave the bedroom. I wondered how my absence was going to affect the busy farm work, my experiments in the fields, and the progress of the beekeeping operation.

For the farm work, my father proudly said to leave it to him when he came to visit. Lady Maika and the village chief graciously assured me that they were monitoring my experiments. Finally, when Ban brought me some bear meat, he cautioned me to rest well, since the beekeeping was going according to plan.

Why did everyone insist so strongly that I should not work? It was not my intention to push myself over my limits. Did I really look that eager to get back to work?

As I asked these questions to Father Folke, who had visited me with a book in his hand, he burst out in laughter. “I mean, you’re always up to something strange when no eyes are on you.”

“You are making it out as if I were a problem child.”

I always planned ahead and acted towards achieving my goals, so why that

image of me?

“I don’t think you realize it yourself. You probably think you are walking at a normal pace, when in reality you are running at full speed.”

“Hm... Well, I am aware that I sometimes act strange.”

“It’s good that you at least recognize it. Or maybe that’s actually worse?”

I recollected saying something similar about Father Folke, who was now heartily laughing. Thinking that I was in the same category as this guy, I started to feel a bit remorseful. Ever so slightly.

After chuckling for a while, he handed me a book. “This is for you—you must be bored. I just picked one which I think you haven’t read yet, but if there is any specific book you want to read, let me know.”

“Thank you. You know me well.”

Father Folke snorted in response, as if to say, “Of course I do.”

Since my body was still recovering, all I could do for now was taking care of my health. In that case, I wanted to use this time to read as much as possible.

“Although it looks like you’re almost done reading all the books in the church.”

“Yes, I am not sure what to do about that. Since I read all the notable books first, there is not too much of interest left.”

We both folded our arms and groaned in thought.

It was not like I was dissatisfied with the books at the church. Especially the fiction books were one of the few sources of comfort in this village. However, it seemed unlikely that I was going to gain anything more from reading the guides and other non-fiction books. For example, the ones on agriculture talked about fertilizer like this, *‘The necessary nutrients for the field are [something I could not read the name of] and [something else]. When spreading them out you need to take care to do this thing.’*

Relying on my limited knowledge of agriculture from my past life, I guessed that the words I did not understand were related to nitrogen. I remembered hearing that nitrogen was important when it came to fertilizing. And as you may

have realized, even if I was right, I had no idea how to produce this fertilizer.

According to the guide, you had to use the “high-pressure, high-temperature method” to create a certain substance, which you had to mix with something else to generate a chemical reaction to then finally obtain what I assumed was nitrogen. But there were no details regarding the “high-pressure, high-temperature method,” and I did not have enough knowledge of chemistry to know what the “certain substance” or the “something else” could have been. I needed to study this world’s periodic table of elements.

In addition, this village lacked the necessary equipment to produce said substance. The stoves only heated up to relatively low temperatures and were difficult to adjust. On top of that, there were no laboratory instruments such as flasks or cylinders that could have withstood the chemical changes. I also would have needed a solid pressure cooker to create the required high pressure. Not to talk of the measuring equipment to determine the precise weight and temperature needed for the chemical experiments. In some cases, it might have also been necessary to rely on an amount of power unachievable by humans or other organisms to create a large dynamic force output.

It’s pretty clear that none of these exist in this impoverished village. I’m not even sure I could get everything in the capital.

Until now, I had always been able to act by gathering stuff from the village, but from here on out, I likely needed to look outwards.

“Father Folke, may I ask you if it would be possible to acquire new books?”

“Hmm... Getting one or two new ones shouldn’t be a problem. But it’s not like you just want to read whatever is available, right?”

“Yes, you are right.”

It would not have mattered if it were purely for my reading pleasure, but I wanted books that helped improve our daily lives. As a researcher, Father Folke understood the importance of data, and he was worried that he could not procure any books fitting my standards.

“If you go to the temple in the city, you can ask Mother Yae to look for specific books, but I’m not sure he would necessarily understand what you’re

talking about...”

“I know, that is only to be expected.”

After all, at the current stage of this civilization, even professionals based their understanding of bacteria and viruses on the knowledge that “it has always been this way” and “it was discovered by our ancestors.” If I asked them for a book “explaining the fundamental concepts relating to the invisible particles which make up all materials,” they would not have known what I was talking about. Although maybe at the capital it was possible to find a researcher specializing in a related field.

“It looks like we are at a stalemate for now,” I said.

“In your case, it might be better to think about a way to get to the capital right away.” Half-jokingly, Father Folke made the best proposal.

“I guess that is what I need to do. I wonder how many years it will take me to save up enough money to visit the capital.”

As I started coming up with a plan, he patted my head. “See? You immediately get caught up in new projects.”

“But it is not anything strange, is it?” My desire to visit the capital was comparable to a young country boy wanting to work in the city in my past life.

“Yeah, there are a lot of people who have the same dream, but I don’t know anyone who started calculating travel expenses on the spot. I’m sure that, if it were possible, you would’ve already dashed out of the door.”

“I think I have enough common sense not to rush out the same day.”

“But you’re not planning on staying here either,” he countered. I did not have any comeback to this declaration hitting the bullseye. “That’s why people who are given to worry cannot let you out of their sight.” Father Folke laughed as if he was definitely not one of them.

“Should you not worry a bit more about your cute little disciple?”

“Worry? About you?” Father Folke laughed hysterically. “Don’t be silly! I’ve told you before—you won’t be killed so easily!”

“As a matter of fact, this time around I was on the verge of death...”

“No, I’m even more certain now after seeing how you handled your high fever.”

Why? What kind of person looked at a half-conscious child suffering in pain and concluded that that person was not going to die?

“Do you not remember what you said during the height of your fever, when other people were crying from worry?”

“No, I do not remember anything from that period. What did I say?”

“I was very impressed by your words.” He wiped off a tear from his eye before proudly continuing. “You said, ‘I won’t die. Not from this. I’ll survive. I’ll live.’ And you kept murmuring these phrases over and over again. No wonder the god of death who came to take you would give up and just return.”

I was at a loss for words. But was it really that funny to see my desperate will to live?

In the evening, after all the visits had finished, Mrs. Yuika appeared with a delicious-smelling dinner in her hands.

“Thank you so much. I am sorry you have to go through so much trouble for me.”

“Don’t worry about it. That’s the least I can do for the brave little hero who protected the village.”

“You are exaggerating.” I felt embarrassed. My mental age was a bit too old to enjoy being treated like a child.

Mrs. Yuika replied with a loving smile to my red face. Was that her motherly instinct or was she teasing me?

“How is your stomach? I thoroughly boiled the bear meat we received from Ban, but it might still be a bit too heavy.”

“It is fine. I will take care to chew well and not eat too much.”

I took the plate of bear meat and vegetable hotpot. She had taken great care to cook the vegetables as soft as possible so that I could eat them.

“It is delicious.”

“I’m glad you like it.” Mrs. Yuika smiled while watching me eat.

What a privilege to eat such a delicious homemade meal while having someone as beautiful as Mrs. Yuika looking at me. *I wish I could be in a similar situation with a single woman. If only my body was more developed...* I indulged in my impure thoughts while fully awaiting some form of divine punishment.

“You can continue eating, but there is something I wanted to tell you.” Mrs. Yuika brought me back from my wicked thoughts with her gentle voice.

I nodded while chewing the bear meat. I wondered what it could be.

“This winter, I plan on sending Maika to my family in the city,” she declared.

Oh, that was indeed a surprise. I assumed she was going to stay with her extended family to learn more about life in the city. It was going to be Lady Maika’s high society debut.

“To be honest, Maika is doing perfectly fine studying here at the moment. She learned how to read and write, and she knows how to calculate... But I want her to learn different skills in the city,” Mrs. Yuika continued.

“I understand. Interpersonal relationships are important, and there is no harm in studying in a different environment than this village.”

She clapped when she heard me agree. “Exactly. Once she comes back, she’s going to stand out simply by having visited the city. However, as I said earlier, Maika is smart enough that she doesn’t need to go to the city. That’s all because of you, Ash.”

“Not at all. It is because of her own efforts. I only responded to her curiosity.”

It was true that I only taught her the things that she wanted to know. If she had not asked me, I would not have responded. In that sense, I was the same as my beloved books. As long as she did not take the book into her hands, flipped the pages, and read the text, they were nothing but a useless lump of fibers. Although I felt that once I started enjoying our lessons together, I had also talked a lot from myself and taught her things without her asking.

“Even if you think like that, as her parent, and as a member of the village

chief's household, I'm deeply thankful to you. Please accept my gratitude."

There was no way I could have refused after such kind words of gratitude. She really used sweet and soft language. "I am honored by your words. Of course, I accept it."

"Thanks, Ash."

I was honestly happy. It felt good to be thanked by a charming person whom I admired. I almost brazenly smiled.

In order to fulfill my own dreams, I was prepared to involve as many people as necessary, run at full speed, stumble, fall over, and even break. It was heart-warming to hear others thank such a selfish person as myself.

Mrs. Yuika seemed to have a good understanding of human emotions. Her gentle eyes were whispering to me, "It's not bad, right? The undeniable appeal of gratitude and praise from other people."

"Ash, please continue to let us be grateful towards you," she added.

Or to put it differently, she wanted me to refrain from anything that would make her or the villagers shout abuse at me. She was cunning to bring up this plea after feeding me the sweet lure of her gratitude.

"You got me. There is no way I could do anything that causes trouble after hearing your words."

"If you think like that, then I guess it's my win." She showed me the brightest smile I had ever seen.

I had completely fallen for her. Even though she had put shackles on my mind so I would not go on a rampage, I did not feel bad. This is what dogs must have felt like when they were put on a leash to go for a walk.

"I have nothing to add—you beat me completely."

"Hehe. But I'm sure there would've been no problems even if I didn't prod you like this."

"I wonder if you are right."

I had never thought about needlessly causing harm to anyone else, since I had

assumed that the most efficient way to achieve my goals was to pretend to be a saint. However, my reasoning did not necessarily align with my emotions. There was a possibility that I would have stopped considering others when overcome with emotions. Then, maybe I would have acted on impulse. I did not think of myself as a purely logical person capable of preventing such a scenario.

Thus, Mrs. Yuika drove a wedge into my emotions as a precaution. Undoubtedly, she had only pretended to be such a charming person for her plan to work. It would not have been as effective to receive words of gratitude and respect from a plain person without any allures. Quite the contrary, it might have even been repulsive. I wondered when exactly she had conceived this plan, and if there had been any other victims. I was excited just thinking about it. *I think I might like Mrs. Yuika a bit too much.*

“I think you would’ve been fine. After all...”

“Yes, I will take extra care to not cause any problems from here on out!”
Please don’t tighten the ropes any more.

“Hehe. I think I’ve tamed you enough for now.”

“I agree. Please spare me if you are truly grateful.” *Seriously. I’m not sure I can go on living if I’m going to be bound hand and foot.*

“It looks like it worked better than expected. But don’t worry, I just have a little proposal.”

“Oh, what is it?”

“Would you like to accompany Maika to the city?”

“Yes!” I reflexively replied without thinking.

Mrs. Yuika looked understandably a little concerned. I had just run wild, immediately after promising I would not do anything like this. I was really sorry.

I opened my mouth to apologize. “When are we going to leave? I have heard that there is a temple on another level compared to our church. I cannot wait to read all the books they have!” My logic circuit was unresponsive. Without a doubt, I was on a rampage. “Oh, and there will be different produce from that area as well as trading goods from other cities. As a base of distribution, the city

is bound to have exciting new goods, technology, and knowledge! I will be able to conduct new experiments!”

For a while Mrs. Yuika folded her arms as all my desires spilled out, then she burst into laughter. “Well, I don’t even know what to say anymore. You exceeded my expectations once again.”

“Not at all, I still have ways to go. I am just honest about my feelings.”

“I think you’ve already come a long way. I thought of several ways to convince you, like saying that while it wasn’t the capital, the city was going to bring you one step closer to the former.”

“I see! That is indeed another point of attraction.”

I could not wait to go. When talking to Father Folke, I should have prioritized the closer city over the capital. After all, there were still a lot of holes and flaws in my plans.

“Just wait a little bit, Ash. You will go to the city, but for now, can you wait?”

“I am sorry for getting ahead of myself. I am just excited.”

I cooled down after seeing Mrs. Yuika’s pale face regain color. Although, on the inside, there was still a hot fire burning, ready to burst out at any moment.

“So, when are we going to... Oh, right. You said Maika will leave this winter.”

“Yeah, I want you to join her then. Until then, there are still a lot of things to do, like talking to your parents and finishing your jobs.”

“You are right. I also have my field experiments which I left halfway through. I need to finish those.”

In that case, I had to complete as many tasks as possible while I was still in the village. I also needed to write up all my research results. Maybe it would also be useful to look for materials here which did not exist in the city.

“It looks like I am going to be busy.”

“I’m happy, albeit a bit concerned, to see you like my proposal.”

Why are you concerned about a ten-year-old in high spirits?

And so, it was decided that I was going to the city in winter. There was no

doubt that this was a significant turning point in my life in this world. I just hoped that the city was cleaner than the ones from the Dark Ages in my past life.

Next to the church was a public burial ground. Fifty years after the foundation of this village, we were only the fourth generation, but it was unclear how many hundreds of people were buried here. They likely had not been able to afford proper funerals for all of the deceased.

The graves were very modest. In the middle of the cemetery, there was a mound of earth surrounded by wooden poles. Each pole represented a deceased person whose ashes had been buried inside the mound. I joined my hands together in front of one of them and lowered my head.

“My beloved, may the wolf god’s invitation drive off any hardships, may the monkey god’s guidance result in harmony, and may the dragon god’s protection guarantee peace,” I prayed for their soul.

I repeated this in front of several other newer poles.

They were not necessarily grave markers of people whom I had known well, but rather children who were born in the same year as me. That was all that connected us. I did not think they had even considered me to be special or talented. However, I remembered them—or rather their death—quite vividly.

For example, one day I noticed this girl missing from her usual group of friends. I heard that she had caught a cold, and five days later received the news of her death.

The boy over there broke his leg after he tripped while cheerfully running around. His parents even took him to a doctor in the city, but his leg became necrotic and he returned only in the form of ashes.

The girl over there disappeared while foraging for edible plants. Ban brought back what was thought to be her arm, which was then cremated.

The newest grave marker had been erected when I was eight years old. After complaining about suffering from a toothache, the boy’s cheeks swelled up and he developed a high fever. He fainted and never woke up again. Most likely,

some bacteria from a cavity had traveled through his body.

I did not think of those deaths as disasters that could not have been prevented by human hands. Each one of them could have been saved given the right resources.

Each grave shouted out the final thoughts of the deceased at me.

“What a poor world!”

“What a dangerous world!”

“Why is no one helping me?”

Their deaths had covered me in ashes of despair.

At first, I had felt deeply sorry for them. But I realized that was rude towards their resting souls. There was a better approach.

Yes, this world is poor. Yes, this world is dangerous. That’s why I need to change it.

I should not have dwelt in despair, but rather taken this as a trigger for my determination. One misstep could have landed me in this grave instead of them. All that had separated us was a bit of luck. In the end, they had turned into ashes simply because they had been a little unluckier than me. In that case, it may have been the fate of the survivor to be buried in the ashes of the dead.

Or so I had thought. I now felt that it was our duty to rise from the ashes and sow seeds among them. I did not know if this was the right way to mourn the dead, but as someone who was eventually going to join them, I would have wanted something to grow out of my ashes.

It had taken me ten whole years to gain such a positive outlook. How negligent and cowardly I had been.

I announced my departure to those who had turned into ashes in my place. “I will leave the village this winter, so this is a goodbye.”

I did not know how my journey was going to end. And I was not sure if their deaths had been in vain. Still, I felt a sense of responsibility.

“From here on, I will do everything in my power to change this world.”

In that moment, I had sown the seeds among their ashes. While I did not know whether they would grow into flowers, wheat, or trees, I was certain that something was going to rise from the ashes.

“It is time for me to go now.”

This was the last time I was going to smolder among the ashes. I was ready to face the unexpected in the city and light up my dream in a magnificent fire.

Yuika's Perspective

Maintenance of the graveyard was an important part of the village chief's duties. The rituals were of course still held by the priest, but as the person in charge, it was my utmost responsibility to pay respect to those who had supported this village.

I would have been lying if I said that it was an easy task. Especially immediately after someone had died—my heart felt heavy. It felt as if the newly added ashes were pressing down on my body and soul.

However, this year, the weight was lighter than ever. And I knew why. All thanks to that boy who I thought was a little strange, and who turned out to be extraordinarily strange, in fact. Over the past year, Ash had managed to dramatically reduce our death toll to a point where no one had died last winter.

As I headed towards the graveyard with a light step, I unexpectedly found another visitor. And coincidentally, it was the person who I had just thought about. Ash was praying in front of a grave marker that didn't even belong to his family. This reminded me of the day I had visited the same graveyard in the fall two years ago.

Heading towards the graveyard, my body had felt heavier than usual. The negativity shackling my feet and my legs didn't just come from the extraordinarily cold weather, considering it was still the beginning of fall. Only a few days ago, a child Maika's age had been buried at the graveyard. It would've been weirder if I was light-footed. I let out a sigh heavy enough to drop like a rock on the floor, but it was immediately swept away by the fall breeze, making me even more miserable.

The graveyard was so deserted that even the wind sounded loud. Not even the grieving parents of the deceased child had visited the grave. But I could understand them. Death was all too present to keep on mourning. It constantly lurked beneath our thin layer of skin, ready to swap positions with the living as soon as they showed a moment of weakness. There was no need to visit the graveyard; death was constantly with us. Normally, this was the philosophy of the villagers, but that day I found a shadow standing among the graves.

For one brief moment, I thought—or rather I sensed—that I had seen a ghost. He was about the same height as the boy who had died, and stood right in front of his grave marker. He looked emotionless, and his eyes were paler than those of someone on the verge of death.

“Mrs. Yuika?”

As a result, I froze when that shadow of a person talked to me.

“Are you here to clean the graveyard? Thank you for your services.”

However, I composed myself again right away. He showed a mature yet gentle smile. I was relieved to see that it was just Ash.

I politely greeted him back. “Hello, Ash. You don’t have to thank me. It’s my duty as the wife of the village chief.”

“No, I insist. Everyone is grateful for your work.”

What an accomplished child. Even many civil officials in the city didn’t show as much consideration as he did.

After his polite greeting, Ash offered to help me. Of course, I refused at first, but since he insisted that he was going to stay here anyway, I gave in. We split up to clean the graveyard and I glanced at him several times. He seemed the same as always, but I couldn’t forget his earlier expression.

I was originally born into nobility as the daughter of a feudal lord. I received the best education in order to surpass everyone else. In that environment, I was always praised for my ability to see what people really felt and thought. I could tell someone’s true intentions just by analyzing the faint movements of their faces, their little gestures, and the content of their speech. Because of that ability, I had realized for a while now that Ash’s smile was not as gentle as it

seemed on the surface. It was an expression of despair.

Since he was such a smart boy, I had no doubts that he was always anticipating pain and suffering more than the average person. Most people didn't think about tomorrow's empty stomach until they felt hungry the next day. However, Ash anticipated the hunger and started worrying about it in advance, leaving him with a tired mind once he was faced with the reality of the empty stomach. That must have been painful for a young child like him.

I was surprised he had been able to normally interact with his fellow villagers until now. I felt that his ghostlike expression from earlier, with eyes deader than those of a corpse, was his real self. It made me feel powerless as the village chief's wife—I wanted to do something for him. However, that was easier said than done. Providing enough food to prevent an empty stomach sounded simple enough on paper, but I didn't know if I was capable of it.

My father and the civil officials serving under him had always called me a genius and expected great things from me. Therefore, when I decided to marry Klein and move to Noscula village, my father was vehemently opposed. He said, "You will only waste your talent in a rural farm village like that. There is better work waiting for you!" Back then, I perceived it as a statement from a jealous father who didn't want to lose his eldest daughter, and so didn't give it any second thoughts. I wanted to support my beloved husband, and some day, turn the village into a prosperous town. I was keen about my prospects, but once I started living here, I realized that my father had been right. I didn't have any skills that were useful in a farm village.

My talents, which had been praised in the city, were skills related to human interactions. For example, I realized that the official in charge of finances looked exhausted. When I talked to him, I found out that he was equally skilled at math and literature, but disliked the former and liked the latter. No matter how skilled someone was at their job, if they disliked it, they weren't going to make any progress. Therefore, I proposed he change positions, and he ended up becoming much happier as a diplomat. I came to the conclusion that one of my strong points was determining what position suited people doing administrative work.

Obviously, in order to use my talent for human interactions, I needed human

resources. In the city, there had been a lot of people, but in the village not so much. I might have even gone so far as to say that there were no people who could've benefited from my talents. But in order not to reopen my wounds too much, let's just say it was lacking in human resources. Most residents were farmers who weren't in a position to switch to a job more suitable for their skills. There was no meaning in simply assigning them to a new field.

That being said, I *did* implement some changes. Together with my husband, I revised and optimized the resource management of the village warehouse, the use of farming tools as community property, and the surplus reserves in the case of a bad harvest. We tried slowing down the decline, but it didn't seem to work. The last remaining workhorse collapsed, the couple in charge of beekeeping died, and only one hunter was left.

Each winter children and adults alike were dropping like flies. Our generation was still fine, but I worried about my daughter's generation. Was my cute baby girl going to be able to raise her kids in this village? If I had to be honest as an administrator, I could not say yes. There weren't enough human resources. All I could do was interact with and manage people.

My husband Klein was very talented with weapons, and specifically with his sword, but neither of these skills was useful in the current situation. This village didn't need someone who managed the existing resources or someone to protect the people. This village and my daughter needed someone who created new things. Unfortunately, the solution wasn't going to fall from the sky. I couldn't help but force a bitter smile.

However, there was a sliver of hope left—Ash. He was known as a weird yet mature person. While he was a child, he looked just as, if not more, calm than most adults. I had hoped for him to one day become a leader among the farmers. However, I knew I was wrong the day of Maika's eighth birthday.

By chance, Ash was helping to arrange the warehouse and I saw him casually calculate the number of wheat bags. To my surprise, he used multiplication, which no one had taught him! I got excited at the appearance of an unexpected human resource. I was in awe. With a little training, he could become much more than a leader of the farmers. I could see him being an assistant to the village chief. I wondered how much more he would blossom once he started

receiving a proper education, considering how smart he already was. Maybe—just maybe—there was still hope.

Back then, I had felt such hope for Ash, but his own intelligence was wearing him down. There would have been no better medicine than providing him with a plentiful life, but alas, that was impossible. I shook my head. If I couldn't reward him materially, maybe I could at least create some diversion.

Let's see... He's not the type to run around, so how about reading out some stories? I could choose a hero's tale; that should be interesting for a boy too.

I was just a bit worried that he would think of it as mere child's play, considering his mature demeanor. Still, it didn't hurt to try.

I decided to invite the other children too and create a lively and fun atmosphere. I remembered a story about a lone hero who saved a suffering village, which seemed exactly right. I smiled at my choice. This sounded more like an encouragement for myself than for Ash. After all, I wanted him to become a hero who saved our village.

The recital went down very calmly. All the boys and girls loved it and got excited, but Ash, my guest of honor, was just listening very quietly. Since it was after sunset, I didn't see his face properly, but he seemed unresponsive. I had failed. To Ash, it must have seemed like mere child's play after all. I had been too naive.

A little while after the recital, rumors started going around the village that Ash was acting strange. His visits to the church and his relationship with Father Folke dealt a double blow to the villagers. On paper, the church was a place for studying, but the number of residents who had actually used its services was zero. However, now Ash was attending church regularly. That was the first blow. On top of that, he was talking to Father Folke, who was known as a difficult person to deal with. That was the second, even bigger blow.

Ash must have had amazing communication skills. Father Folke almost never left the church. He looked extremely pale and talked in a gloomy voice. No decent person liked talking to him for longer than necessary, especially since he openly admitted that he found it bothersome to meet other people. Hearing

these rumors almost made me want to introduce Ash as a candidate to become a diplomat. Still, they were just rumors, and I didn't know what was Ash actually doing at the church.

But it didn't stop there either. As I decided to observe Ash's actions, Maika also started behaving strangely.

It all started on a day when we were supposed to clean the warehouse. I told Maika to come help after she had come back home from playing with her friends. I went ahead by myself and waited for her, but she didn't show up even after we had started work. I was sure she had run into one of her friends on the way and went to play with them. I wished she had a bit more self-awareness as the daughter of the village chief.

I had already prepared a lecture for her, but when Maika arrived at the warehouse, she seemed different somehow. The first thing she said was that she was sorry for being late. Usually, she came up with a simple lie or some silly excuse, but this time she just apologized. I wondered if she had maybe eaten a strange fruit. As I seriously worried and asked her questions, she pouted. *That was my bad.*

Apparently, she had run into Ash on the way to the warehouse. Remembering how efficient his help had been during summer, she tried inviting him to lend us a helping hand. That in itself was normal. Anyone would have probably done the same.

"Then, is Ash coming today?"

As if to confirm my thoughts, one of the girls interrupted our conversation. "Not today."

He wasn't going to come. It seemed unlike Ash to turn down a request for help. The other children agreed and started a discussion. Half of them worried about Ash and the other half lamented his absence. Ash was known to be a weirdo, but also very smart. And he seemed to be popular with a lot of girls, as demonstrated by the noise in the warehouse.

Maika grew more and more annoyed at the situation and raised her voice. "Aren't you all supposed to work?" She tried putting an end to the topic with her loud rebuke.

Oh my. Could it be...? That my little Maika has developed an interest towards him?

Previously, when I'd been impressed by Ash's mathematical abilities, I'd asked Maika if she was interested in taking him as a groom. That would have been the fastest and most reliable way to secure human resources. Besides, even I had to admit that Ash was likely going to grow up being a very fine man. Although he never could've outclassed my darling Klein, of course.

Considering how popular he was with the girls, I had expected Maika to be on board, but...

"I'm sorry, Mom. I don't like Ash..."

While saying so, she seemed sad, as if she were looking at a little bird with a broken wing.

"I mean, he always pretends to smile, but he looks like he's in pain. Seeing him like that hurts me..."

I recognized that. Just like me, Maika had the ability to see through people's real thoughts and emotions. That's why she flinched at his pain and suffering. I had been careless; she was still too young to carry such a heavy burden.

In addition, I was now worried about Maika. Similar to a lamp, an ability like ours had the power to shine light into the darkness, but at the same time, it also cast shadows. In this village, she was bound to encounter only the shadows. In the absence of any real applications for her talent, people might have ended up antagonizing her or becoming jealous.

Consequently, now I was worried about both Maika and Ash, and both problems didn't seem to have any quick solutions. First of all, in my duty as a mother, I needed to make sure that Maika wasn't going to suffer from her talents. In the meantime, I had to shelve my plans for Ash. Although it seemed that soon enough they would unexpectedly come falling down again from that same shelf.

Months went by and a lot of things happened, including Ash's funeral and his miraculous return. That felt like a once-in-a-lifetime incident, since the village

was usually quite peaceful otherwise.

One day, after studying at the church, Maika came back with a smile so wide that I thought her cheeks might fall off. She looked extremely cute to me, but I wondered what she was thinking.

“I touched Ash’s hand!”

So that was the source of her smile.

Until recently, I had been worried that she was too busy playing around to fall in love, but now she had fallen head over heels. Luckily, her crush was the serious and mature Ash, otherwise I might have become anxious again.

Maika went on to talk excitedly about what had happened. When she explained why she had touched his hands, my presence of mind was blown away by a storm. Ash had developed a new medicine which he had seen in a book. *That’s a joke, right?* I thought.

Discovering technologies from the remnants of ancient civilization—that would’ve been the job of researchers affiliated with temples. And not just any temples either; these people usually worked in the capital. How could a little child have accomplished something like that?

When I hurriedly questioned Maika, she told me that he called it “aloe ointment.” Originally, it was supposed to be a salve to treat wounds, but it also softened rough skin. Apparently, Ash’s hands were smooth like a baby’s. Maika said that he had gladly shared some with her after seeing her interest. *I want some too... I need to make some negotiations later.*

Anyway, if this was true, it was big news. This ointment was definitely going to sell. Men and women alike were suffering from rough hands, so there was already a demand. Especially, women were likely going to become dependent on it. *I was going to become dependent on it.* All women had the instinct of wanting to stay beautiful. Even more so when they were in love.

And contrary to works of art, the ointment was going to run out—it had to be bought over and over again. Suddenly, this village had a new exclusive local product which didn’t even exist in the city, whereas previously it had none. We had been getting by sparsely using a minimum of resources, but now there was

a completely new source of income.

I was dazzled by the sudden ray of hope shining into this village whose future had been uncertain. All my doubts became mere shadows of a dream, and I no longer cared that such results seemed impossible considering his age, or how impressive his use of source materials was. On the frontier of discovery, the most important thing was the results. As such, the focus should've been Ash's accomplishment. Or, as I was tempted to call it, his miraculous blunder.

Next, I thought about the ramifications. How much could we make? How effective was it? Did it spoil? There was also the problem of how much raw materials were available. The price could wait for now. I also needed to procure some for myself... Admittedly, my thoughts were running a bit wild; I was getting ahead of myself.

Ash's words spoken by my daughter brought me back to reality. "Ash said to use it carefully because it's still an experiment."

"Experiment?" I scratched my head at this unfamiliar word.

Maika replied once again using Ash's explanation. "Uhm... It means testing a medicine before giving it out to a lot of people, and using it to see if there are no side effects."

"I see... An experiment."

Indeed, results often differed from expectations. My husband always said that it was difficult to swing his sword the way he imagined it, and my father had often talked about the impossibility of moving troops as expected. It must have been the same for the effect of the medicine. It sounded convincing coming from Ash, who was himself something like an incarnation beyond expectations. I wondered if I could conduct an experiment on Ash. To see how he was going to move next, and if he was going to exceed my expectations.

For now, I decided to start by observing this ointment experiment. I needed to find out what Ash's intentions were before discussing any plans. A strange mix of suspense and relief overcame me when thinking about dealing with Ash as a business partner. I was sure that he was going to surprise me again. On the other hand, I didn't have to fear any ill will from him. Both were guaranteed. I feared, yet at the same time looked forward to my conversation with Ash. First,

I was going to ask Maika to procure me some ointment too. *“Experiment,” huh? It sure has a nice ring to it.*

My discussion with Ash over dinner had been a success. As expected, he surprised me and he didn't have any ill will. However, I couldn't really say he had good intentions either.

“It is just a normal, childlike dream. I want to live a convenient and plentiful life as it is described in the stories of books, such as the legends from the ancient civilizations,” he had said.

He showed a smile filled with hunger and thirst, as if he were a poor person in front of a fine banquet, or a fool who wished for everything. One misstep in his word choice and he would have sounded crude, but he was radiant. *I can see why my daughter fell in love with him.*

There was no room for any good or evil intentions—they would have just burned to a crisp faced with the fiery passion of his desire. He was focused on his dream and he smiled because he enjoyed pursuing it. Any human had experienced this feeling before, but this boy expressed himself with such fervor. Even now I still had goosebumps. He was a monster. An unworldly human monster who did human-like things.

The most frightening aspect of this monster was his extraordinary charm. Anyone would have followed him if they'd seen how happily he pursued his dreams. Anyone would have wanted to see his dreams. Anyone—including me. I was convinced that this boy was a monster... but that didn't matter.

This was not the tale of a hero who exterminated the monster in the end. I was not going to allow that. I had become a full-fledged ally; I had turned into the witch who protected the monster from any heroic plans. I was not going to run from him, and I was not going to fight him either. In my story, I would cut his too-sharp nails so that he could hold hands with humans. All the while I supported the girl who had fallen for the monster by sometimes gently—and sometimes strictly—pushing her towards becoming his bride. *How wonderful.*

It would have been even better if the monster turned back into a human once he received a kiss from the girl. I wondered if my daughter was capable of such

magic. Either way, it seemed still a long way ahead. First, I needed to cut the monster's sharp nails and make him hold hands with the girl.

I wanted to believe that I had been successful in cutting his nails. Softly and gently, I had tried to make him understand that maintaining human relationships wasn't all that bad without actually using those words. According to Ash's personal statement, who had been injured from his fight with a bear, my technique was in fact so effective that he didn't want me to elaborate too much. However...

"Mrs. Yuika? Are you here to clean the graveyard? Thank you for your services."

He greeted me in the same way as on that fall day two years ago. His soft albeit not childlike smile and his offer to help also echoed that day. But this time it was different.

"Thanks. But are you sure you should be here? Shouldn't you be packing to go to the city?"

"Actually, yes. Quid has set up a store in the city, so I do not have to take as much luggage with me, but wrapping up my experiment in the field has been harder than expected. When concluding, I came up with several new ideas that I want to try out."

My one question was met with a gust of wind. Lately, Ash was so energetic that it sometimes felt like I was about to be blown away. I thought I had succeeded in cutting his nails, but at the smallest opportunity they started growing back. I didn't know anyone worthier of the name "Ash" than him. Maika had told me that the name originated from a god who revived from the ashes. That definitely sounded like Ash.

The boy, whose eyes were paler than those of a corpse only two years ago, was now talking about his dreams with a fiery look. Similarly, the village, which had an uncertain future ahead two years ago, was now prospering with the appearance of new industries. This may indeed have been a miracle from the god of resurrection.

"Well, anyway..." Ash smiled, slightly embarrassed after seemingly realizing

that he had been talking too much himself. "Please let me help clean the graveyard. I am still greatly in debt with you."

"Because of your upcoming studies in the city? Don't worry about that! I'm glad Maika won't have to go alone."

I replied with a reassuring and friendly smile, but Ash shook his head.

"Of course, I am grateful for that too, but that is not what I meant."

"Are you referring to the aloe ointment?"

Once again, he shook his head. "No, what I am most indebted to you for is the recital you held two years ago in the fall. I really enjoyed that," Ash said with a plain, childlike smile.

"Oh, I'm glad you liked it." *I'm really glad. I managed to help you back then. If I saved your carefree smile, then there's nothing I'm prouder of. I'm sure that smile will go on to help many more people.*

"But talking to you now, I realize that I will never be able to pay back all my debts to you," he said.

"Don't worry about it." *You have helped me out too, and I'm still planning to rely on you in the future.*

"No, you always help me out. One day I will repay you."

"I'm looking forward to it." *And I'm a little bit scared.*

I wondered how big that repayment was going to be. I found myself giggling at the thought.

"What do you want to do in the city, Ash?" I asked him about his future while cleaning the graveyard. The same future which had been wrapped in uncertain darkness. I was glad I could talk about it with a light heart now.

"There are so many things I want to do that I am not sure where to start. I definitely want to read loads of books!" he replied joyfully.

Ash resembled a bird spreading its wings and taking off on a journey. A bird rising from the graveyard's mound and scattering around the ashes while flapping its wings. He was shining bright in the sky, catching everyone's eyes

while flying into the distance. I couldn't fly myself, but I was prepared to follow his brilliance to the end of the world, together with a myriad of other people.



A Certain Compiler's Afterword

First of all, thank you for taking this book into your hands—I'm really grateful. I would also like to thank all the people who went through great efforts to make the publication of this book a reality.

Originally, *Fushi no Kami* was entirely written from Ash's perspective, but for this book I added those of some of the people around him. In addition, I included some more objective narration, effectively turning the original *Fushi no Kami* into a newly compiled edition. I hope you enjoyed reading how the other residents perceived the maverick Ash, who suddenly showed up in their impoverished village. Personally, I think it adds new flavor to the original story.

I'm writing this afterword in the village where Ash grew up. While the townscape no longer resembles a village at all, I visited it in the hope of gaining some insights into the starting point of Ash's journey. At first, I was disappointed seeing how big of a town this place had become, but I managed to find some traces of the past.

They are selling honey products in all the cafes and candy stores with Tanya's name on the label, and most restaurants have a "Yuika style" stew on their menus. If you go to a well-established restaurant, you can even commemorate your visit with a "Yuika style bear stew." The barkeeper at my hotel boasted that they were the only establishment that based their dishes off of Yuika's authentic recipe, while serving me a "Peddler Quid cocktail," which was just watered-down mead. He joked, saying, "It's believed that drinking this here brings good fortune, so no one complains about this essentially being a watered-down scam drink."

I would recommend everyone to visit the town at least once with this book in your hands! Also, it looks like I will be able to travel to the neighboring city once the next volume comes out!

Finally, I would like to personally thank some more people. First, I want to thank my parents for introducing their easily-bored son to so many different

stories and giving me the freedom to get to where I am today. I also want to thank my high-school friend for recommending me a novel that changed my life into a fun ride. I'm also grateful for my engaged university teachers, who taught me how to do research and influenced my way of thinking. And finally, I want to thank my friend who has always been my first reader. I hope you like it.

—*Written in the town once called Noscula village.*



《 FILTANYA 》

Slowly, I lifted up my heavy eyelids and was surprised to see Lady Maika standing right in front of me. She seemed startled too, since she took a step backward with a bright-red face.

“Wha—?”

《 ASH 》

“M-Morning!
Sorry for waking
you up!”

《 MAIKA 》



*“Sir Bear,
I am warning you.
If you attack my village,
then I will kill you!”*

Bonus Stories

Maika and the Cat

Today was another day of studying with Ash. Thinking about the fun ahead made work so much easier. I had become quicker at getting my tasks done and as a result my mom no longer scolded me as much. Every day was fun.

As I entered the church, I saw Ash's head peeking out from the benches. But something seemed off. His head was not tilted as if he was reading. Could it be? I quietly sneaked up next to him and, as expected, it was not the same Ash as always. His eyes were closed, and his head was hanging down as if all strength had been sapped from his neck. He was asleep! What a super rare sight! Usually he was energetic from morning until evening. But this was my big chance to get a look at his sleeping face, which was otherwise reserved for his family members.

Taking care not to wake him up, I got even closer. His face, which always showed a gentle smile or raging hellfire in his eyes, now looked serene as if he had forgotten all his worries. It was the opposite of his usual mature expression. I couldn't help but be charmed by his naturally innocent features.

"How cute!"

I wonder if he'll notice if I keep staring like this. But I can't help myself. Just a bit longer. And maybe a bit closer. Seeing how fast asleep he was, I thought it was safe to approach even further. But as I started moving, I felt as if I was being observed. *Oh no, I can't let anyone see me. This is too embarrassing.* I reflexively turned towards the gaze. It didn't come from either left or right, but rather from below.

"..."

Then our eyes met.

"..."

Mine and those of the cat on Ash's lap. How I envied this cat! How I wished I could have been on his lap too! I would have been so happy to look up at his sleeping face from there. While I ground my teeth, I couldn't bring myself to drive away the cat who was sitting imposingly. If by any chance I woke up Ash, this dreamlike situation would end.

Besides, it was rare to see this cat who would usually not let anyone touch him be so comfortable around a human. As the only cat in our village, he was very popular with both children and adults, but he seemed to prefer being left alone. Whenever someone approached to pet him, he ran away on the spot. It felt unreal to seem him relaxed in Ash's lap. Could it be that this little guy was also charmed by Ash?

As I stared the cat squinted and quietly meowed. I knew what he was trying to tell me. He was saying, 'Ash is special.' *I agree. Ash is so wonderful. If I was a cat, I would also jump onto his lap any chance I got.* That desire only grew stronger when I looked once again at Ash's sleeping face. I really liked him. I liked him so much that my chest tightened just from getting a glimpse at a new side of his.

I could hear his calm breathing. Not being aware of how he was making other people feel, Ash was sleeping peacefully. My eyes were drawn to his lips. He was sound asleep. It didn't look like he was going to wake up anytime soon. Maybe I could get just a little bit closer? Just a little bit, a tiny little bit...

Yuika's Light

My daughter Maika was down with a fever. No doubt she had caught a cold. Outside had become much colder and there were several other sick people in the village. In a hurry, I had my husband Klein report to my family in the city in my place, so that I could take care of Maika.

"You've got a really high fever. Make sure to rest well."

No matter what I said, she didn't respond. She kept breathing heavily. For the time being, I put a wet towel on her forehead to lower her temperature. *Oh wait.* According to Ash, it was more effective to place the towel on the neck or under the armpits. It seemed that when it came to my own daughter, I had

forgotten the same advice which I had given to all the other villagers who reported having a fever. This was no good. I needed to get a hold of myself.

“You’ll get through this Maika.”

She was sweating profusely. Ash said that in this case it was best to have her take in as much liquid as possible. I needed to prepare some salt honey water. It was already past breakfast time and soon the other sick villagers would come to pick up their portion too. But I also couldn’t just leave Maika alone...

As I was in this state of confusion and my body had frozen, I heard a knock on the door accompanied by a soothing voice.

“Mrs. Yuika? It is me, Ash. Your husband told me everything and I have come to help.”

“Ash! Please come in. Maika is asleep.”

I felt relieved. My husband Klein, my pride and joy, had made sure to let a capable and reliable person know of our situation before leaving the village. That person was Ash.

“I am coming in. I heard that Maika has caught a cold.” Ash took a fleeting glimpse at me and Maika with a calm expression on his face. “Please stay beside Maika. May I borrow your kitchen in the meantime?”

“Of course. You can use anything you want.”

I expected nothing less of Ash. He had immediately understood that I needed his help. It was also very gentleman-like of him to not pry around the room more than necessary.

“I am not just going to do anything. First, I will boil the water and make the salt honey water. I have also brought some cold medicine that I made. Leave it to me to deal with the other sick villagers.”

“Thank you. I’ll leave it to you.”

Ash replied with a comforting smile. I could see why Maika always went on about how his smile looked like a sun. It radiated like a bright and warm light. Nothing had changed but I felt like everything was going to be okay.

“Afterwards, I will also prepare lunch and dinner. I am thinking of cooking an

easily digestible stew. I want to use your oldest ingredients first, so I will consult you again later regarding that matter.”

Seeing him act so swiftly lifted a weight off my shoulders. I was sure things were going to be alright. I had met with Ash before and we had planned for exactly this situation. We were resolved to get every single villager through this winter. My confused thoughts started to clear up. It was as if I had found a light guiding me in the right direction.

“Maika, your crush is really reliable.”

You can't let him slip through your fingers. You need to rest and get well soon, so you can be by Ash's side again.

Tanya's Light

Before I knew it, I had given up on a lot of things. When both my parents had died, I threw a lot of my dreams out of my nest. I sacrificed my free time to raise my younger brother Jigil. I had no time to foster my secret feelings for my big bro even though I yearned to be with him. My dreams of becoming a beekeeper and stepping into my dad's footsteps had already been rotting away for a long time at that point. I missed dipping my fingers into the honey that my dad harvested and indulging in my mom's dishes made with that same honey. Recently even those cherished memories had started to fade away. However, now things were different.

“Tanya.”

As I sat on a fallen tree, big bro Ban called out to me. I had come with him and Ash to the forest to train for my upcoming tasks as beekeeper. Seeing as how I was the only one out of breath, I realized that I still needed a lot of practice.

“Thanks, big bro. I'm just a little tired, but I'm fine.”

I smiled but he looked worried. He took the towel from around my neck and started wiping the sweat off my forehead and neck.

“Wipe it off.”

While I had known him for a long time and I liked my big bro, I still didn't

completely understand all of his short remarks. As I tilted my head in bewilderment, Ash, who had wandered off by himself, came back.

“Ban is saying that you should not ignore your sweat because you will end up using even more stamina.”

Big bro nodded along in satisfaction to Ash’s explanation. *Is that what you meant?* Ignoring the look of surprise on my face, Ash was taking clues from big bro’s gestures and kept the conversation going. Big bro didn’t say a single word the entire time. Most people would have only seen a blank stare on his face, but Ash seemed to know exactly what he was trying to say.

I got a little anxious. Would I also eventually be able to understand him as well after spending more time together? I knew that Ash was amazing, but in this regard, I didn’t want to lose out to him. I wanted to be Ban’s bride after all. Eventually. At the moment I couldn’t even bring myself to say it out loud...

I felt determined when both of them looked up at the same time.

“Ban, was that a turtle dove?”

A turtle dove! I remembered how big bro would always bring those to our house and my mom prepared them together with honey. Covering the wings in honey sauce before grilling them gave it a uniquely delicious flavor which I could feel explode in my mouth at this moment. This was one of the memories that had started to fade away, but now I could recollect it so clearly that my stomach started to grumble. And I knew exactly what had triggered it.

On the day I had handed over to Ash the book which had been passed down in my family for generations, he asked me if I wanted to try beekeeping. When I was ready to refuse and give up because I couldn’t read, he just encouraged me by saying that was irrelevant. He said that I didn’t have to give up anything yet. With those words he picked up all the dreams which I had thrown out and handed them back to me. I swore that I would hold on to them as long as possible.

“If we had honey, we could prepare a delicious meal with that turtle dove...”

Hearing my words, Ash and big bro Band exchanged glances and nodded. A little later I was able to once again enjoy that nostalgic meal, together with my

big bro praising my cooking.

Folke's Light

"Father Folke, it is time to wake up and get out of your coffin!"

An intruder had entered my private dwelling room at the back of the church without even knocking. There was only one person in this village who would've done something like this. I forced my sleep deprived body out of bed.

"Ahhh...Is it morning already? I'm still tired."

"You should go to bed earlier. That way you can get more sleep and live a healthier life."

It was Ash who had walked past the three guarding holy statues as if it was no big deal and come in without permission. Even the gods seemed to be powerless in the face of this guy. On the outside he looked like a regular ten-year-old boy, but on the inside, he was a stupid brat who could have made even a demon prostrate themselves in front of him. This frightening child who might have even appeared like the demon king himself to some, mocked me, a priest, with every breath he took.

"Well that is if you are alive. Father Folke, how many years ago did you die again?"

"Hey, I've not died even once since I was born!"

He was probably referring to the fact that apparently all the other villagers had been calling me the "zombie priest". I would have been lying if I said that I hadn't been aware of that nickname at all. Yes, I did resemble a rotting corpse when I first arrived at this village, but now I had changed. I was fully living as a priest.

"Have you been up all night studying again?"

"Once I start, I just forget the time."

"You should start calling it a night when your candle burns out. Working sleep deprived is not efficient."

While lecturing me, this impudent brat was serving me soup from the pot which he had brought. He finished it off by plopping in a slice of bread. *Hey, watch out.*

“Here is your breakfast. Make sure to say thank you to the three gods and my mother before eating.”

“I am thankful to everything in heaven and on earth, besides Ash.”

I tried to fight back by saying a crude little grace, but Ash was not the kind of innocent child who got offended easily.

“Of course, you do not need to thank me. I will charge you afterwards.”

“Should’ve expected that from a brat like you.”

As we teased each other, I couldn’t help but smile. We never really engaged in small talk, most of the time we just ended up exchanging insults. With anyone else this would have ended up in a fight. But I didn’t have to worry about that when it came to me and Ash. There was a strange bond of trust between us.

It was clear why he felt so comfortable talking to someone older than him without any constraints. We were fellow dreamers. That alone made us closer than any siblings. And to be honest, sometimes I even enjoyed our conversations. However, since I didn’t want Ash to sense any of this, I stuffed myself with the soaked bread to hide my expression.

“Lately this soup of yours has been really good.”

“Right? I have been able to collect all the best ingredients.”

Ash replied happily while he was changing the sheets and making my bed.

“I will take those home to wash.” He said.

“Don’t worry, I can do that myself later.”

“No, no matter what you say, I know you are the type of person who will not change the sheets until there is mold.”

“Are you my mother?”

“No, I am just a volunteer who is trying to avoid having to deal with a corpse in the village.”

“You little brat.”

You really don't have to worry about that. Yes, I was the zombie priest until a while ago, but I've come fully back to life, and it's all thanks to you. I was surprised myself. I had never thought it possible to revive with so much passion from my lethargic state. You really are a legend in the making, Ash.

The Undying Light (Maika's perspective)

I was trembling with fear. I felt as if I was going to faint at any moment. Ash's upper body was painted in bright red blood and his face was pale as snow. On the brink of death, his heavy breathing remained the only sign showing he was still alive. Anyone could have guessed what had happened seeing as there was a huge bear lying next to him. Ash had fought and defeated the bear, but gotten seriously injured in the process. That is why I had said I wanted to go with him! Stupid Ash!

I started to feel anger rise in me, only to be immediately frozen again by my fear. There was a chance Ash was going to die. At this rate it was almost certain. I was so scared, I just wanted to burst into tears and run away. I wanted to cry out for my mom but there was no point in calling the name of someone who wasn't even in the village. I couldn't rely on anyone. No one was here to help. My love was about to die, and I didn't know what to do.

My eyes welled up with tears. Did I really not know what to do? I was wiping away my tears faster than they could fall. Ash had happily told me what to do before he passed out, so I should know what to do. I remembered his last words. Stop the bleeding and use the ointment. After that I was supposed to take off the bandage to restore the blood flow. And he used poison on the bear, so I needed to cook it well before eating. *That last one doesn't really matter now.* I had to remember the rest. Everything he had said were things that I had previously learned from him.

It was bad for you if the evil little things, the germs, entered through the wound. That was why it was necessary to disinfect. The claws of a bear were covered in bacteria, I needed to thoroughly cleanse the wound. Besides, the village itself was not that clean on the whole, so I needed to cover up the

wound with a freshly washed cloth. And I also had to boil the well water before using it, since that was full of bacteria too. I remembered everything Ash had taught me.

“Everyone, listen! This is what we need to do to save Ash!”

First, we had to bring him to a place where it was possible to properly treat him.

“Men, please carry Ash to my house! I also need the people living close by to boil some water and bring it there!”

Mr. David was the first to respond. While comforting Mrs. Sheba he effortlessly lifted up Ash.

“That’s a job fer me! Don’t ya worry, this one won’t drop dead so easily!”

What else did I have to do? If only someone who had experience treating wounds like my dad or Ban were here...

“Maika, please let me help too!”

Tanya had pushed her way through the crowd of people.

“I have learnt a bit from going into the forest with big bro Ban and Ash has also taught me how to treat wounds, so I think I can help!”

Right, I could rely on Tanya who had also sat in on my lessons with Ash.

“Maika, I have brought a book that Ash used as a reference for medical stuff. If there’s anything you don’t know, you can look it up in here.”

Folke had arrived holding up a book in his hands. Thank you, priest. With the medical guide that Ash had read as a reference, even someone who was as bad at remembering things like me could get the job done.

“Okay, let’s hurry up! We can’t let Ash die!”

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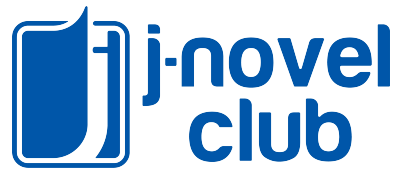
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Fushi no Kami: Rebuilding Civilization Starts With a Village Volume 1

by Mizuumi Amakawa

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